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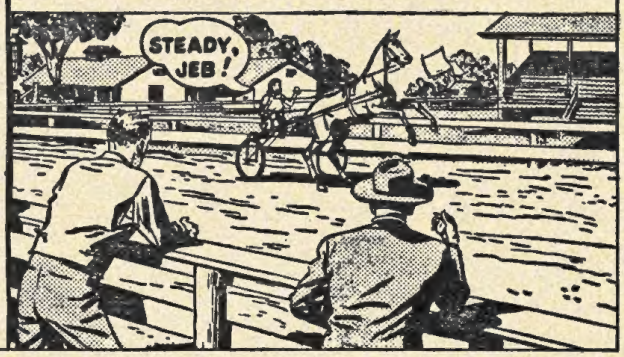

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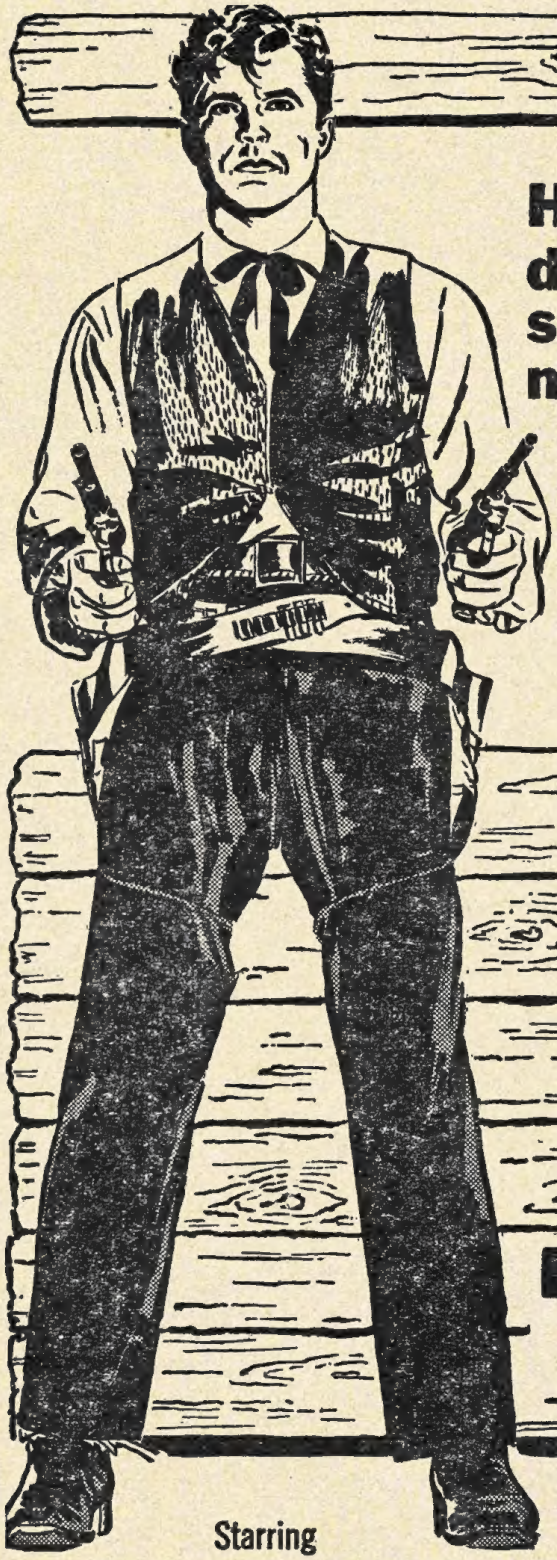

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By
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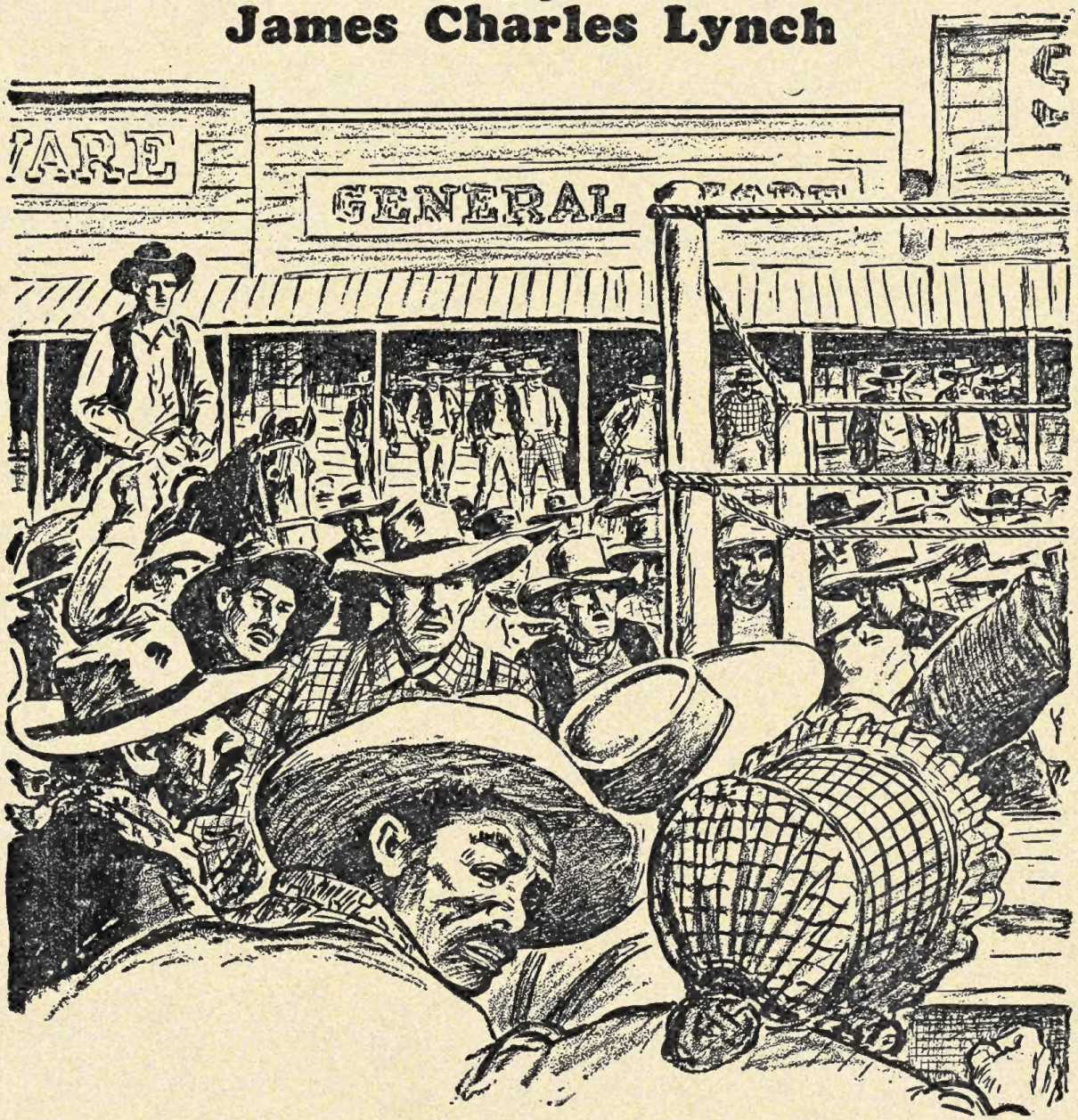
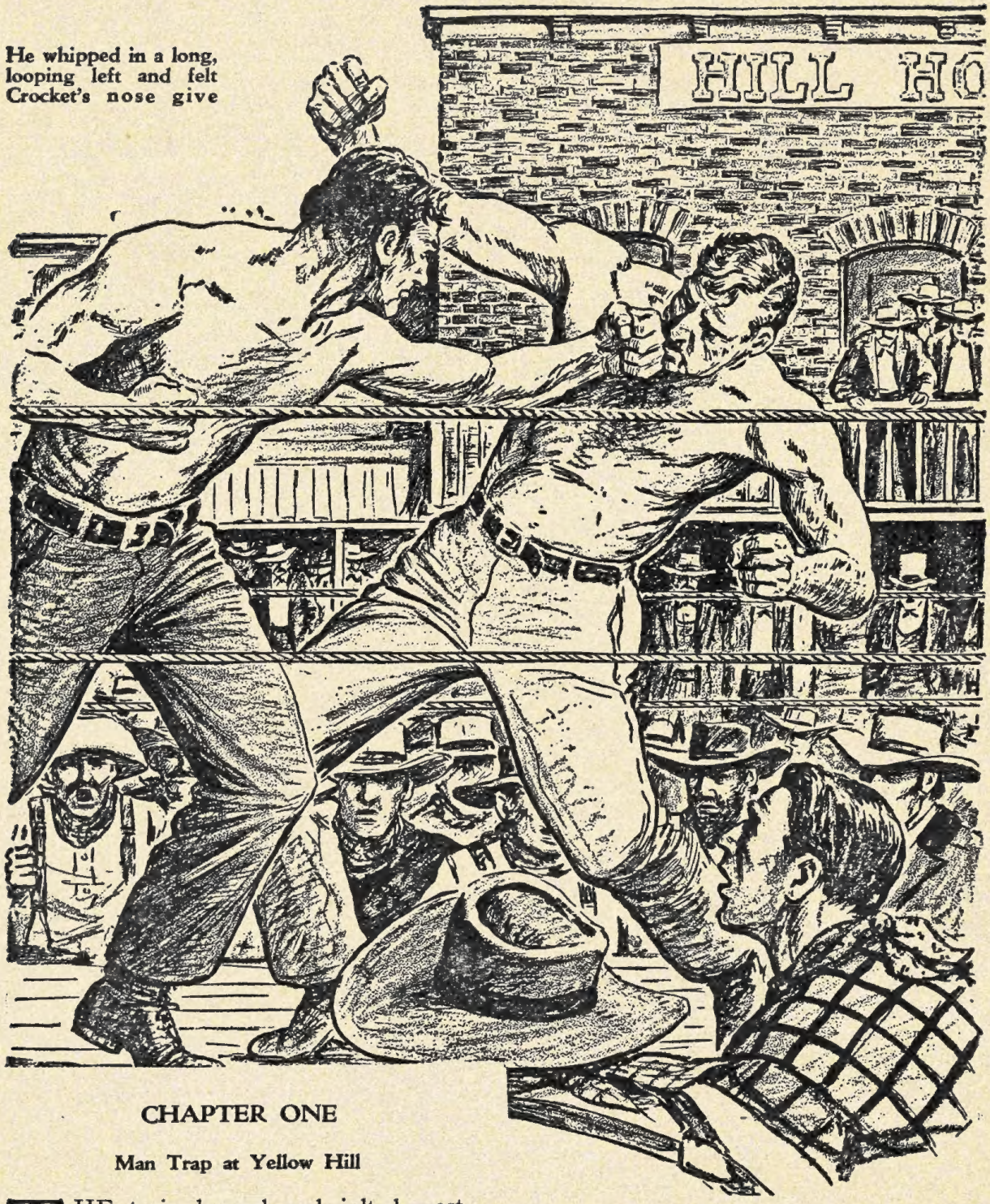


Into Mike McCall's battered, bleeding skull crept the thought: "Dying can't be so bad. Lots of good people do it every day. But nobody just lays himself down and dies. A man has to be dragged into it, even by the Lord. You think you're tough? Well, we'll see about that now. Tough men don't ever die. . . ."



He whipped in a long, looping left and felt Crocket's nose give

CHAPTER ONE

Man Trap at Yellow Hill

THE train lunged and jolted westward through the wet night and in the odorous smoking car Mike McCall toyed with an after supper cigar, trying to enjoy it the best he could. He was a tall, restless man and this fastest of trains moved too slow to suit him.

Time had become an important factor in McCall's life. There is just so much time given a man to use on this earth and here he was, in his middle twenties, and with the ink scarcely dry on his mining school diploma. Wreathing his strong, high-boned face in smoke, he wondered if there would be enough time left in his life to pay the debt he owed Matt Quaintance.

The car hummed with talk and some of it was about the Spanish War, just over, but the word most heard was *copper.*

Mine bosses and miners, traveling west, talked of drifts and tunnels and stopes and the legends of tougher men than they. Suave, soft-handed men spoke easily of leases and millions and the tricks of legal banditry by which men gained or lost fortunes. Even in these soft men there was an underlying toughness to be sensed. Copper meant toil for many and ease and fortune for a few so there was no quarter sought or given in this business. The stakes were too high. A man had to be lucky to find copper, smart to hang onto it and a tough nut to cash in on its riches.

Mike held himself aloof from this talk, though Matt Quaintance had once said of him, "There's more copper in Mike McCall's veins than blood."

The talk about him stopped so suddenly McCall lifted the cigar from his teeth and looked up. The woman, the one who had boarded this train with him and whose presence had disturbed him so much these past three days, had entered the car and was making her slow way down the swaying aisle.

The heavy speculation behind this sort of silence would have embarrassed most women, but this one was neither flustered nor hurried by the hush. She moved easily and proudly, intently searching the face of each man and beginning to show the strain of worry that had grown on her by the hour.

McCall waited for his turn, wondering about her. She was a tall, supple woman, with a tall woman's elegant grace. Her nose was straight and not heavy, her lips soft and full. When Mike had first looked at her, her eyes had seemed jade green, but this worry of hers had put dark glints in them.

McCall could not figure her out and it had become increasingly hard, all this time, not to offer her his help. It would be so easy for her to reward a man for services rendered. But to help her might involve him and there was Matt, waiting for him. Matt came first.

She hesitated longest by McCall's chair, looked at him a long time and then went on. All he knew about her was that her name was Bond and there were no rings on her fingers. He suddenly wished he was not quitting this train within the half hour, never to see her again.

He turned and put his face against the window and looked out, trying to see nothing but the slanting rain, but always seeing her, her beautiful face and the strong, smooth column of her throat, the dark red hair piled high on her proudly held head.

Then the car rocked on a curve and, ahead, a red flare lifted against the low, scudding clouds, the reflection of flame belching from the smelter stacks at Yellow Hill. This was the end of the line for Mike McCall. He put the woman from his mind, rose and quit the smoker for his own car where his baggage waited.

In a dark vestibule between cars, he collided with her heavily, knocking her back. He reached out and caught her hands. He lifted her slowly, holding to her while she breathed heavily.

"I'm a clumsy man," he said. "I'm sorry."

"I'm all right," she said. "And never call yourself a clumsy man. I doubt if any other man on this train could have caught my hands so quickly. Or hung on to them so long."

She started to pull away from him but a jolt of the car threw her against him and he still held her, feeling her cool palms grow warm. Standing close to him she looked up, cool and possessed.

"Please let me go now," she said. "I think the train is stopping."

"Yes," he said, and the fact was the springboard of his impulse. He let go her hands and grabbed her wrists, swinging her arms around her and pulling her close. He found her lips and held her that way a long time, then let her go.

She stepped back, wiping her lips with the back of her hand, then she struck out, slapping him across the face. He had expected that, but not her next move. Her hand came up again, this time to lay her palm soothingly against his cheek.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was a cheap thing for me to do. But, maybe, I'm just a cheap woman. I have been wanting you to do that."

Mike wished now he could take it all back. What he had done he would always remember and those kind of memories were not for him. There was no more time now. The train was stopping. From an inner pocket he withdrew a card and

handed it to her. Then he hesitated.

"You're not cheap," he said. "And, if you wanted me to do what I did, you're lucky I'm leaving the train here. You've let my fine clothes fool you. I'm not the big salesman I've pretended to be. I'm just a tough nut dressed up. When I shed these duds for a miner's cap, you wouldn't want any part of me. Keep looking for a better man, sweetheart. And good-bye."

He brushed on past her, leaving her to stand there and stare at the card he had handed her. It would not hurt her to know who he was now. She could not cause Matt Quaintance any trouble.

HE STEPPED off the train onto the rain-swept platform of the Yellow Hill station. He didn't see Quaintance in the shifting crowd waiting there, but that was not odd. A man could not see far this night. The smoke from the smelters hung in a heavy pall, defying the slanting rain to level it, and the station lights beat only half-heartedly into the storm.

But it was easy for a man to tell that Yellow Hill was Butte and Coppertown all over again and rolled into one. Men dropped from the train with a shouted, "What's new on the Hill, Jack?" but those waiting had no curiosity about what went on away from here. Yellow Hill was a world of its own and sufficient unto itself.

Mike smiled and filled his lungs with the heavy, odorous air. Through the soles of his shoes he could feel the steady vibration caused by the heavy stamp mills crushing the ore from the mines and he could remember now of always feeling for that jarring all the time he had been away. It was good to be back again, to be part of this.

Mike moved into the light of a station window and waited for Matt to come out of the gloom. An odd trio came up and stood near him. One was squat and fat and swathed in a great coat. The derby hat he wore failed to hide his baldness. A tall, cadaverous man stood beside him. Next to the tall man was a dapper little fellow dressed in the latest fashion. This one dabbed at the rain-drops on his face with a handkerchief.

"No sight of them," said the dapper man. "What's gone wrong?"

"Take it easy, Paul," the fat man wheezed. "They're still getting off."

The tall man said nothing. He placed a black cigar carefully in his teeth, not lighting it. He seemed thoroughly preoccupied watching those alighting from the cars. Once he stared hard at McCall and his interest was a heavy thing Mike could almost feel.

Mike turned his back to them, his patience lessening as time went on. He had sent a wire ahead. Matt should be here.

The three behind him spoke at once, catching Mike's interest. When he looked, the thin man was turning, revealing a strong, hawk-like cast of features. He lifted the cigar from his mouth and called loudly, "Miss Bond! Merry! Over here."

Mike's impulse was to turn and get away but he was too late. She had seen him. Hurrying out from behind a station man who carried her luggage, she smiled at Mike, but moved directly toward the three waiting men.

"Mr. Fergus," she cried. "And Mr. Burls and Mr. Halstead. I thought such a reception committee was only for visiting royalty."

Fergus, the tall man, held her hand a moment, obviously finding no humor in her remark. But the fat man bowed, caught her hand and planted a slobbery kiss on her fingers. "It is and she's here," he wheezed.

She pulled her hand quickly away, laughing to make her actions seem a natural shyness. The dapper man omitted all greetings. He seemed too worried to observe any niceties. "Where is he?" he demanded. "Don't tell us you failed."

"Aw, don't talk like that," the fat man said. "How could Merry fail us? You didn't fail us, did you, honey?"

"I almost did," said Merry Bond. "Until the very last minute I thought I had. But he's here." She turned and smiled across the interval at McCall. "There he stands, gentlemen."

The four started forward and Mike filled up with anger at himself for being so thoughtless and impulsive and such a damned fool.

"You are Mike McCall," the tall man stated. He had a high-pitched voice that grated on the ears.

"The lady is mistaken," Mike said. "The

name is Randall. My line is women's dress goods."

"Fiddlesticks," Merry Bond said. "Why you insist on using that name is your business, but it certainly caused me a bad time. I was certain you were on that train. They told me, when I got to the place you lived, that I had just missed you by ten minutes and that you were taking the Limited west."

She opened her purse, drew out the card Mike had given her and handed it to Will Fergus. "Don't believe him," she said, "if he sticks to that Randall story. He gave me this card himself and it says on it, 'Mike McCall—Mining Engineer'. I think, after what happened, after what he did, I would have known him, anyway. He is exactly the kind of a man Matt described. The kind I had hoped—" She stopped, biting her lip.

Some of the anger went out of Mike and worry took its place. "Did Matt Quaintance send you for me?" he demanded.

Will Fergus said, "No. We sent her for you, for Matt's sake. The man needs you, bad."

"I understand that," Mike said. "Why isn't Matt here?"

"A meeting," Fergus said. "He's up to his ears in work. There's a lot of trouble here, McCall. Matt should have sent for you sooner, but he's a stubborn man. He had his heart set on you finishing school before he asked you to help him out. But let's move on now. Harvey, put Miss Bond in a carriage and see her home. Paul and I will take McCall to Matt."

The fat man grabbed the girl's arm, enthusiastic about his errand, but she pulled away to hold her hand toward Mike.

"Forgive me," she said. "And please don't think I betrayed you. We are all Matt's friends."

Mike held her hand and smiled down at her, glad she was Matt's friend. "I hope Matt will forgive me as easily. Will I see you, soon?"

"Soon," she said, smiling. "I'm anxious to see what difference a miner's cap can make in you."

SHE smiled again and walked on down the station platform, the fat man trotting and wheezing along beside her. The tall man offered his hand and said, "I don't get this Randall business, McCall. You trying to put something over on poor Matt?"

"Poor Matt?" Mike said. "How long have you known him, Fergus?"

"Ever since he found and opened up the Bonanza Queen. Halstead, here, and Burls and I, are three of the minority stockholders. Matt's troubles are our troubles. You haven't answered my question."

Mike saw no good reason for holding back now. "Matt wanted it that way. He wrote me a letter and told me to stay hidden under a rock until he was ready to spring me on this camp. He chose the name Randall for me."

"I didn't know that," Fergus said. "I didn't even think he had written you. I thought he was waiting for you to graduate and then come on when you got good and ready."

"He sent the letter to the school's dean," said Mike, "and the dean gave it to me with my diploma. Matt's a funny man. Ever since he took me under his wing, when I was a little shaver, he's planned to send me through school."

"By God," said Paul Halstead. "If Matt wants McCall unknown, we better see to that. We better just imagine he's Randall for the time being."

"I'd be obliged if you would," Mike said. "And I hope that Bond woman doesn't say anything. When I gave her my card, I had no idea she would get off here. I don't know what Matt's going to think about me, letting a woman turn my head."

Fergus sniffed and said, "Yours isn't the only head she's turned. She's done a pretty good job on Matt, too. I sometimes wonder if that isn't what Matt's kept her around for, to turn men's heads. I have a carriage waiting."

Mike picked up his baggage and fell in step with them, finding himself not liking the way Fergus talked about Merry Bond. Yet she could turn a man's head, there was no doubt of that. In a sudden rush of wonder he thought of her as the cause of Matt's trouble, and felt uncomfortable.

When they were in the carriage and bouncing up a cobbled street lined with lighted saloons, Mike said, "Now let's have it, Fergus. Matt is more than just busy. Speak up."

Halstead said, "Might as well tell him, Will. He has a right to be prepared for the worst."

Mike held himself still and Fergus cleared his throat. "Paul makes it sound too bad," he said. "Matt's sick. What it is, we can't find out. Maybe he's just despondent. The whole situation is pretty bad. You don't know how fortunate it was we got hold of you before certain elements in this camp found out you were here. You're the key to this whole situation."

"Am I?" said Mike. "How?"

"You and Matt," said Fergus, "own seventy-five percent of the Bonanza Queen, don't you?"

"Not that I know of. Matt owns it, not me."

"You and Matt are partners. Maybe he hasn't told you, but you are. It's a matter of record. Only the vein Matt found—it started out to be the biggest and richest on the Hill—has petered out. You're a mining engineer and Matt needs one, bad. An honest one. That kind are hard to come by around here, what with Big Sid Crocket owning most of the Hill and wanting what he doesn't have. I judge you'll be honest enough. I can tell you, too, that when Matt passes on, all of his share goes to you."

"I'd sooner see Matt well and healthy than own any part of a mine," said Mike. "And what makes him think I can find a faulted vein any better than he can? Matt Quaintance has forgotten more about mining than I'll ever know, even if I have been to school."

"Matt's flat on his back," Halstead pointed out.

"Did this Bond woman know he was sick?" Mike asked.

"No," Fergus said. "And I didn't think it best to tell her tonight. I didn't want a hysterical woman on our hands."

"Why should she get hysterical about Matt? What's her connection?"

"She's a minority stockholder, like us," said Halstead. "But the way she acts, you'd think she was Matt's daughter. And Matt listens to her. She can get about anything she wants with that face of hers."

The carriage was stopping now before a three-story brick building with wide stone steps leading up to a plate glass door. Light blazed through this and Mike caught a glimpse of white-shirted men moving behind the glass.

"The Hill House," said Fergus. "It's the best place in town and they try to make Matt comfortable."

"We better go in the back way," Halstead said. "It's a wet night and Crocket is bound to be hanging around the lobby. Matt has bragged so much about McCall, Crocket is bound to smell a mouse if a stranger comes to town and goes straight to Matt's room."

"You're right," said Fergus. "But I feel pretty good about this now. I think our troubles are about over."

They got out. Fergus paid the driver and Mike took up his own baggage. "This way," Halstead said.

The dapper man turned down the street to the end of the building and ducked into a brick-paved passageway, running now with rainwater. Restlessness rode Mike now and he trod on the little man's heel's, hurrying him.

At the back alley, Halstead turned the corner and disappeared. Mike started to follow. Fergus, behind him, reached out and shoved him hard. Mike tried to swing around, letting his suitcase fall from his right hand, but the thing tripped him and he started down.

"That's him, boys," Fergus said sharply.

Mike raised an arm instinctively and pain ran along it as a club beat it down and followed to crash against the side of his head, stuning him. While a little light still flickered in his mind he heard Fergus say, "Don't touch anything in his pockets. This is one dead man we want identified easily. That's important."

The second blow fell and Mike felt himself roaring off into black space, a bitter taste in his mouth and a bitter thought in his head. He wondered what Merry Bond was thinking now, knowing what she had done?

CHAPTER TWO

The Dead Man Named McCall

DEATH, to McCall, seemed an odd state of being, a void where a man floated in a haze of pain and recalled old memories. He had never thought much about death, though he had often been close to it. There was the time twenty of them had been trapped eight hundred feet beneath the ground when a hundred feet of

tunnel roof had caved in. After the third day, before they heard the faint tappings of the rescue crew, there had been talk of dying and a few had started to weep and pray.

Then Matt Quaintance had said, "Dying can't be so bad. There's lots of good people do it every day. But nobody justs lays himself down and dies. A man has to be dragged into it, even by the Lord. You boys think you're tough. Well, we'll see about that now. I got a crust of bread left in my pail. I'm going to pass it along. The man who is sure he is going to die can eat it. And while he's filling his belly, let him think up a good story about how he got it full, so when he faces his God it won't seem like he's lying so much. Tough men don't ever die. Tough men get killed."

So the crust was passed from hand to hand down there in the stinking darkness and each man tried to show how tough he was. And it was a glorious kind of toughness, showing you could tighten your belt a notch further than the man next to you. Four days later, when the rescue crew broke through, they were all still alive, still passing that crust around. It had been worn down to a mere sliver, but no man had tasted a crumb.

Mike had seen a lot of tough men killed, yet even some of those had come back. They had dropped down unguarded shafts. They had been crushed or carved with knives, shot down and beat with clubs. But they had refused to stay dead.

Mike tried to force himself into the thin ranks of these tough nuts. He fought and blundered, struggling to break out of that overwhelming darkness, trying to find a man to take the crust from him.

When he found the man, the fellow was lying face down, a knife stuck in his back. And he was really dead. Mike sat there and mourned a while, then a hilarious idea came to him and he heard himself laugh. It would sure fool someone, wouldn't it, if he changed clothes with this man?

Changing clothes with a dead man was a hard and gruesome task and, once the change was made, Mike regretted it. The black became blacker and finally there was nothing but the low voice praying.

"Oh, Lawd," said the voice, "he sure needs your help, Lawd. I'se done the best I could. If you'd just make him drink the rabbit soup, O, Lawd, he'd get well quick. I done made it from the white rabbit, Lawd. The big one with the pink ears."

Mike tried to open his eyes and when light seeped in under his lids it felt like fire touching them. But he had to see. He could not believe his ears.

He saw, first, the wall of a clapboard shack. In a corner was a stove filling the room with heat and, on it, a bubbling pot that gave off savory smells. Turning his head slowly he saw a longer wall. On a peg hung a bootblack's box. There was a table against this wall, two wired-together chairs flanking it. Over the table hung a tattered picture of Christ on the Cross. Before the table knelt an old Negro, his elbows on the table, his gnarled hands clasped, his wrinkled forehead resting on his thumbs. He was bald except for a fringe of snow white hair above his ears and a ragged wisp of white beard that ran around the angle of his jaws.

"Who," Mike whispered, "are you?"

The man jumped and rolled his eyes, but he remembered his duty. He bowed his head and said, "I thanks you, Lawd," before he rose and came to stand beside the bed.

"You're back, suh," he said, awed. "Back from marchin' with the dead."

"Who," Mike repeated, "are you?"

"Oh, I'se Good Morning, suh," said the man, grinning. "That's certain right. My pappy's name was Morning and my mammy named me Good. The gentlemen's of the town, he say to me," his voice rose to a high chuckle, "Good Morning, Good Morning. It makes a fine sound, suh. What is your name?"

Mike closed his eyes a moment and decided to withhold that information. "I can't remember," he said. "Where am I?"

"You right here, suh," said Good Morning. "And you been bad handled. Mighty bad handled, suh. Them railroad policemen, they jump you for riding the box cars, suh?"

Mike became conscious, for the first time, of outward sounds. Rain still drummed on the shack roof and, nearby, switch engines set up a clamber. He was conscious, too, for the first time, that he was naked.

"Yes," he said. "It must have been the railroad bulls. Did they take my clothes?"

"No, suh. You had your clothes on when

you come a-creeping to my door. There the are, suh, all washed and dry."

Mike followed the pointing hand. On a length of rope strung across a far corner of the room, hung a blue wool shirt, a pair of heavy miner's pants and a tattered coat. "Those things?" he said. "They're my clothes?"

"Now I don't rightly know, suh," Good Morning chuckled. "But they is what you all had on. Now I'm going to feed you some rabbit soup, suh. Nothing like the rabbit soup for what ails you. This is made with the white rabbit, suh."

MUMBLING to himself, Good Morning went about ladeling out a bowl of soup and Mike stared at the clothes hanging on the line, finally coming upon that dark memory stuck in his mind. The memory of finding another dead man and changing clothes to fool somebody. The idea shocked him now, but maybe it had been a good idea. Only Merry Bond had seen his face in strong light. Fergus and Halstead and Burls had only seen him in the rainy dark and by the light of a struck match.

Good Morning came back with a bowl of broth and a spoon and sat down beside the bed, feeding Mike slowly. It was good, hot soup and Good Morning was enthusiastic about its healing properties.

"It's got the herbs in it, too, suh, though I has to walk a powerful way to get the herbs now. The smelter smoke it kill all the growing things around the town. That smoke is most poisonous, suh. But she a good town. You know your name yet, suh?"

Mike shook his head. "It seems to me," he said, "that I came here to work for Matt Quaintance. You know him?"

"Oh, Lawd!" Good Morning said. "Deed I do. I'm one of Mr. Quaintance people, suh. When Mr. Quaintance needed money to open up Ol' Bonanza Queen he come and say, 'Good Morning, Good Morning. I—' "

"Maybe," Mike interrupted, "if I could see Mr. Quaintance I might find out who I am. You think there's a way for me to see him without the bad folks knowing?"

"Ain't no bad folks in Heaven," Good Morning said. "Mr. Quaintance, he in Heaven, suh."

"He's dead?" Mike gasped. "When?"

Good Morning counted on his fingers, mumbling. "It's five days now, suh. Five long days."

Astonishment hit McCall. "Have I been here that long?"

"Oh, no suh," said Good Morning. "You been here two days."

Mike closed his eyes. If Fergus was right, McCall had owned seventy-five per cent of a faulted mine when they had tried to murder him. What could they gain by his death? Mike swallowed another spoonful of soup and asked, "What happens to Mr. Quaintance's mine? Who gets it now?"

"Now, suh," Good Morning said, "the working of the Lawd is strange. When Mr. Quaintance, he die, his share passed to his partner, Mr. Call. But when Mr. McCall die too, suh, the Ol' Queen she pass on to Mr. Quaintance people. Course, the 'Ol Queen, she ain't no good no more. The copper done vaporated. But Mr. Crocket—he the big man—he's giving us people two thousand dollars each, suh. He's going to use the Ol' Queen's tunnel to get fresh air in the Big Man Mine."

"So McCall is dead, too," McCall said slowly. "How did that happen?"

"Mr. McCall," said Good Morning, "he an evil man. After all Mr. Quaintance done for him. He been a papa to that boy, suh. He chew his 'bacco twice to send that boy to school, Mr. Quaintance done. And that boy, he don't even cry none, suh, when he find out Mr. Quaintance dead. He just get drunk and try to force his presence on a lady. She tell him to get out. He say if she don't let him in he will jump off the roof of the Hill House . . . that's a tolerable high building. And that's just what he done, suh. They buried him yesterday. The judge, he already done ruled us people own the Ol' Queen."

Mike felt a drowsiness coming over him he could barely fight off. But there were still some things he had to know. "How about Matt Quaintance?" he asked. "Did he jump off a building, too?"

"Oh, no, suh. Mr. Quaintance use a gun. He shoot himself."

"No!" Mike cried. "You don't believe that?"

Good Morning hung his head and swayed slowly back and forth. "I don't know what,

suh," he almost wailed. "But there is Mr. Quaintance in his room with the gun in his hand. And he left a writing. The writing say that now he ain't rich no more, his partner don't like him. That Mr. McCall, he a devil, suh. I reckon he just pained poor Mr. Quaintance right to death."

Mike wanted to deny that, but that awful drowsiness settled harder on him and closed his eyes. He wanted to tell Good Morning to watch out for Fergus and Halstead and Burls and not sell any part of the mine to Crocket. He wanted to tell the man to watch out for that Bond woman who was an evil thing without a heart.

WHEN McCall woke he felt better. The rain had stopped and sunlight streamed in through the window over his bed, but he knew this could not be the same day he had come awake in this place. This would have to be the day after.

Good Morning was not around and Mike struggled to sit up. The act brought dizziness and he sat for a long time before he swung his feet onto the floor for the first time.

It was an hour before he could stand erect and the pain in him was a hard thing to endure. He fought it back and stood there, holding to the iron bedstead for support.

From waist to shoulders he was black and blue. They had beat him unmercifully. Only the thickness of his coat and the heavy ribs of muscle around his torso could have saved him from broken ribs and he was not sure of that. It hurt him to breathe.

There was a cracked mirror on the wall and he finally made it that far to have a look at his face. A ragged welt ran from his jaw to his temple. His whole face was bruised and swollen and discolored. He could scarcely recognize himself.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, clothed and ravenously hungry and craving tobacco, when Good Morning came in, staggering under loads of bundles.

"Glory to the Lawd!" cried Good Morning, chuckling. "This is a day, suh. Mr. Crocket has paid us the money. You is up from the bed and I is rich. Two whole thousand dollars I got, suh. I have brung us meat and taters. And for you, suh, I fetched cigars and a slight jug, if you wish. I don't touch the stuff myself."

He dumped his parcels on the table, rummaged in a sack and pulled forth a small box of cigars and a little jug of whiskey. Mike seized the jug and took a long drink, regretting it for a moment when it hit his empty stomach, but when the heat of it flowed through him he felt better. He lit a cigar and savored the good smoke while Good Morning prepared a strengthening meal of meat and potatoes.

When the meal was over and tobacco smoke drifted between them, Mike began to find out something about Matt's people. Merry Bond had been a waitress and later became Quaintance's secretary, running the mine office and taking care of the payroll.

"She's a stunningly beautiful woman, suh," said Good Morning, and Mike could agree to that.

Anny Ferrin was a buxom Irish washwoman who had taken care of Matt's laundry and had been paid off with a share of the mine. Clyde Harrison was a barber, a meek, church-going man who had handed Matt a few dollars when Matt needed it worst. Billy Garth was a policeman, a genial man noted for his pride in his five strapping youngsters.

Will Fergus was a lawyer, a shrewd man who had gone to bat for all of Matt's people, getting the best deal he could out of Sid Crocket. Harvey Burls, the fat man, and Paul Halstead, were gentlemen of leisure, investors. They had put a little in Matt's mine, all Matt would allow them. They were glad now that Matt hadn't let them put in more.

"Them gentlemen, suh, they live at Hill House. That's the proper place, suh. Mr. Crocket, he the big man, he live there, too."

"What kind of a man is Crocket?"

"He the biggest man there is," said Good Morning, rolling his eyes. "He seven feet tall and five yards wide. He lick every man on the Hill. That how he get his first mine. He fight his partner for it, all or nothing. Mr. Crocket, he a powerful man. Don't ever mess with Mr. Crocket."

Mike punched out the coal of his cigar. "I wonder," he said, "if there's any truth in that old saying, 'There never was a man so big he couldn't be licked?' "

"Ain't no saying work around that Mr.

Crocket, suh," warned Good Morning. "That Mr. Crocket, he Goliath pappy."

IN THE middle of the morning, ten days later, Mike McCall came to the edge of the walk across the street from Hill House. The day shift was at work and the night shift, having finished its early morning drinking, was in bed.

The ladies and gentlemen of the town walked Main Street at this hour, brushing shoulders with painted women from the houses and gamblers from the saloons. Traffic flowed endlessly along the cobbled streets, the carriages drawn by fine, matched teams, forced to keep the slower pace of the ponderous ore wagons. No one paid attention to the black-whiskered, blue-shirted bum idling on the walk, a bum named McCall, who owned seventy-five per cent of the Bonanza Queen Mine, if he could get it.

Main Street ran out into the Hill itself, a great, yellow, rising mound of rock dotted with the sheds and gallow frames of mine workings. Tailings and ore piles scarred the Hill and, beyond it, hidden from the town, a flat plain ran out five miles to die against the jagged upthrusts of the Mineral Range.

Mike worried with the supposition that Will Fergus and the others had not really been fooled. True, they had not seen him except in the rainy dark, but no telling what form or nationality or color of man he had changed clothes with in his semi-consciousness. Fergus and his associates might have taken advantage of any identified corpse to force the sale of the Bonanza Queen to Sid Crocket, while they continued to search for the man they had tried to kill. There was only one way to find out what they thought or knew. Face them.

An open carriage drew up before Hill House and the hotel's glass doors opened to let out the biggest man Mike had ever seen. He had to be Sid Crocket. He was six foot six or better tall with an enormous spread of shoulder and narrow hips. But there was a suspicious sag above his belt, the beginning of a paunch, and his smooth face was full and florid red.

Crocket seemed an affable enough man; he waved to passersby and spoke genially to Will Fergus who came out behind him. The two entered the carriage and, when Fergus did this, he faced McCall across a fifty-foot interval of daylight. No sign of recognition brightened the man's eyes, but Mike felt no elation yet.

It was nearly noon when he saw Merry Bond. She came down the street with Harvey Burls wheezing beside her, holding her arm. She was dressed in mourning black, with a black hat and a half veil of the same color. There was little color in her cheeks and her eyes looked heavy and tragic. Yet she laughed when Burls spoke to her, a throaty, pleasant laugh that seemed to please Burls and made Mike hate her. He turned and moved directly toward them, throwing his shoulder into Burls as they passed, staggering the fat man.

"Watch out, you!" Burls bawled. "Watch where you're going!"

"Shut up, you fat slob! Mike mumbled. "You take up too much room."

Turning redder, Burls blustered and Merry Bond touched his arm. "The man's drunk, Harvey," she said. "You run across to the House and have a drink for yourself, now. I have shopping to do."

"The streets ain't safe for you, alone," Burls said.

Mike mumbled at him and walked on a half block, pausing there to look back. The pair still talked but, while he watched, Burls cut across the street and the Bond woman moved on down the walk. Mike McCall, it seemed, was dead enough.

Satisfied now, Mike started back up the street, following the woman. She looked back once, but took no notice of him. When she came abreast of the Emporium Store she paused to look in the windows. Slowly, Mike drew up behind her, waiting for her to turn.

She did not turn but she spoke softly to his image in the window. "You take a lot of chances, McCall," she said. "When I move on, follow me. I'll lead you to my house. I must talk to you. I must."

"Who's waiting for me at your house?" Mike asked over her shoulder. "Crocket and Fergus? Or maybe Halstead?"

"Please, Mike!"

"You're good," Mike said. "Much better than the others. You didn't even blink an eye when I bumped into your fat friend."

She stamped her foot angrily on the brick walk. "Should I have thrown my arms

around you in front of that toad? Do you think it was easy for me to keep a straight face after weeping because you were dead?"

Mike took a cigar from his pocket and lit it. Her words had an effect on him, but he had been fooled by her once. "I think I'm a bigger fool than Adam," he said finally. "Lead out. You don't want to talk with me half as much as I want to talk with you. You're going to tell me some things. If you don't, even that fat slob won't like the looks of your face."

"That's right, Mike," she said. "Stay tough. Don't ever let yourself get a little soft. Somebody might get to like you too much."

She turned from the window and walked on down the street, her shoulders stiff with anger. Mike followed a few yards behind.

Two blocks down she turned right and walked on to the last house on this side street, a white-painted little cottage struggling against the ever-settling soot and dust of the ugly rectangle of yellow dirt in which it sat. Mike closed up with her as she came to the front door and struggled with her purse.

She found her key and they entered a small, neat sitting room arranged with polished furniture, a divan and a pair of easy chairs, one a heavy, leather thing. Merry lifted off her hat, tossed it on the center table and sank wearily down on the davenport. Mike stood still a moment, listening, then had a quick look through all the rooms before he settled himself in the leather chair.

"That is where Matt used to sit when he came here," Merry said. "He would talk about you by the hour, telling me what a fine, tough man you were. He was proud of your toughness, but only because you had always used it well. He used to embarrass me, making plans for you and me."

"And now he's dead," Mike said. "Murdered."

"Now he's dead," Merry murmured. "It was a shock. Will Fergus said he couldn't bear to tell me that night. He said he didn't want two grieved people on his hands. Now tell me, what happened to you?"

MIKE looked at her. "You must have heard. I got drunk and forced myself on you. When you wouldn't have me, I jumped off the roof of Hill House. They found me in the morning and buried me. Under the terms of Matt's will, my interest in the Bonanza Queen passed to you and a few others. And before my grave was filled up, Fergus made a deal to sell out to Crocket. Crocket was generous. To those poor souls outside the gang, he gave two thousand dollars so they would relinquish their shares in order to clear title to him. How much did you and Fergus and the others get?"

She shook her head. "It was not me you tried to force yourself upon, Mike. It was a lady who maintains a suite at the House. I know her. If she had not been put up to it, she would not have resented any intrusion on your part. She would have welcomed it, as long as you had money. Tell me, Mike, did you kill that poor man they found in your clothes? Did you go that far to cover your tracks?"

Mike stared at her. "Me?" he said. "Kill a man so I could hide?"

Tears came into her eyes and she sat there, weeping softly. Mike let her alone. After a while she found a tiny handkerchief and dried her eyes.

"Thanks for not interfering with that," she said. "I've been holding it back too long."

"And what's to cry about?" McCall asked.

"Plenty," she said. "There's so much meanness in this town. There's so much money to be had by merely taking a man's life. The stakes are so high it turns men into beasts. And women, too. It's even getting me. I'm letting that Burls squire me around, trying to worm something out of him."

"To get your hands on more money?" McCall asked.

"No!" she flared. "To find out what really happened to Matt—and you."

Mike grunted. "It's a wonder Crocket stands for Burls taking up your time. Sid looks like a man who would want the best for himself."

Merry made a motion of disgust. "Crocket wants his women to crawl to him. He thinks he's such a great man I'll do that some day. He's told me so. Now stop being so bitter and tell me what really happened to you."

Mike told her. He opened his shirt and showed her his bruised chest and ribs. She shuddered. "I remember changing clothes

with a dead man I found in the alley, but I was out of my head when I did it. I had these rags on when Good Morning let me in. Now tell me this. Have you got anything out of Burls? Anything I could use? I'm going to get Crocket and that gang if it's the last thing I do."

Heat flared in her green eyes. Then, evasively, she looked down at her hands. "Nothing, except that he and Fergus and Halstead are tied up with Crocket. They buy into every claim so they can keep tabs on what goes on. If Matt had only known that and if he hadn't needed money so badly, to open up his claim! He was always suspicious of them. I think, now, that's why he wanted you to keep under cover until you could find out some things."

"You think they killed Matt?" Mike asked.

"They tried to kill you, didn't they? So far, I'm the only one who knows they didn't. And I wasn't sure until I spoke to you and you gave yourself away. You see how vulnerable you are?"

"Yes," Mike said, and rose. "And now I'm twice as vulnerable."

Merry lifted herself from the divan and stood before him, looking up into his face. He wanted to catch her wrists again and put her arms behind her and do what he had done that night in the train vestibule.

After a long wait, she said, "You still don't trust me."

He shook his head. "It's not that. But what I want most now is Crocket's scalp."

She moved closer. "Then you'll have to trust me. You'll need my help."

He shook his head again. "You can help best by keeping away from me. Wait until this is over. Wait until Crocket's done."

He turned and started for the door, but before he could turn the knob she came rushing after him to grab his arm.

"Mike! Let's go away from here. Let's forget Crocket. He's too big for you. Too powerful. As long as they think you're dead, you're safe, and there's no way to get back the Bonanza Queen without proving your identity. I could help you do that, but I won't. I won't, Mike, you hear me? They would find a way to get you, quick. They could even claim you murdered that man to hide yourself. That would make an easy story to believe, Mike."

"No," he said. "We won't run from Crocket. There's Matt's people to think about. There's Good Morning and Anny Ferrin. Clyde Harrison and Billy Garth. There's you."

"You can't help us, Mike. We signed over our shares to Crocket and took his money. Even if you get your share back, all you would accomplish would be to become a partner with Crocket. You would never be safe, then. Never. Please, Mike. Give it up. Take me away from here."

"There's Matt to think about, too," said Mike. "Matt never killed himself."

"Matt's dead. You can't help him."

"He's dead," McCall admitted. "But what he passed on to me is still in my head. Matt was more than just a tough, but kindly old codger. Matt was a sort of a priest and a statesman and a philosopher, all rolled into one. I was only twelve years old when he found me in a dark tunnel, crying because I was afraid and tired to death. I had no folks. Matt was my father and my mother and, because of that, I've been a lucky man. If I don't do what he taught me to do, I'd be letting him down, throwing away the sacrifices he made for me. I wouldn't deserve any more luck."

She seemed so downcast Mike caught her chin and shook it. "Don't worry so much. I don't think Crocket will make a second try for me, knowing I know what I do. The mine might not be worth anything, anyway, except for a circulation tunnel."

She slid her hands up his chest and gripped the lapels of his coat. "Mike, you haven't a penny, have you?"

"None of my own. Good Morning made me take a few dollars."

"Matt told me you had nothing, but remember, I still offered to go away with you. Money would not have made any difference."

"I appreciate that. Some day I'd like to show you how much."

She looked straight at him now and that evasiveness that had made him suspicious of her went away. "Mike," she said, "with this face of mine, and a few promises, I did get something out of Burls. Crocket found the faulted vein of the Bonanza Queen before Matt ever lost it. Working through an exploration tunnel, trying to tap the Bonanza Queen vein ahead of Matt's workings, so he could steal ore from Matt, Crocket found out the vein had faulted. He

went right to work. He has already blocked out more than five million dollars worth of ore.

"You see how much your life is worth, Mike? And you've been around these camps enough to know how much less than that men have been killed for. Now will you go away with me? I've got enough to get us started, somewhere. You'll hit it, the same as Matt did. Matt always said you were a lucky man."

"We'll see," Mike said. "We'll see if he's right."

She pushed herself away from him and dropped her hands. "Then money counts with you, doesn't it? You'd risk your life to get it, wouldn't you? You're going out that door, alone."

"Alone, yes," said Mike. "But not because of five million dollars. Because of something worth more than that."

"Whatever it is," she said, "you're as good as dead."

"Well, don't start weeping yet," said Mike. "Wait until you're sure."

CHAPTER THREE

The Pen is Mightier—?

BEFORE he came again to Main Street, Mike felt lost and incapable. Crocket was kingpin of this camp. His gambling on his physical prowess, winner take all, made him the kind of a man Yellow Hill would look up to and call a hero. The only way to dethrone Crocket would be to beat him fairly in a public fight and Mike had fought enough men to have respect for Crocket's size. The man was a giant.

For an hour Mike walked up and down Main Street, his hands in his pockets, his chin on his chest, his mind searching for enough weakness in him to let him run away with Merry Bond. He finally turned into the Big Stope Saloon and took a place at the long bar. Even in here he had never felt so lonely.

There were few customers in the place at this time of day and the bartender seemed half asleep. "Beer," Mike said, and stood there waiting, tracing patterns in the moisture left behind by the saloonman's rag.

The beer came and he let it set there, still engrossed. He was barely conscious of the slight figure who came up beside him and spoke so boldly.

"How about one, Danny?" said the little man. "You'll trust me, won't you?"

"No I won't," the bartender said. "You know how it is, Jack."

"Go to hell, then!" said the little man, spitefully. "Sure, I know how it is. There's no guts left in this town. You're just too damned yellow to stake a man to a drink, because Sid Crocket tells you not to."

"You got no call," said the barkeep, "to come in here and talk like that. Get out now, Jack. Go on. Beat it."

Mike straightened up and turned. The man beside him was only a little more than five feet tall, a whispy oldster dressed in black trousers and a black alpaca coat that hung loosely on his thin shoulders. One lapel of the coat was dusty with carelessly strewn ashes. A dented derby hat was cocked over one eye and a thin neck bobbed around in a fray, stiff collar. His face was seamed and wrinkled and his angry blue eyes were sunk deep in his head.

"Sure," he said, pushing himself away from the bar. "I'll beat it. I got no call to do anything, Danny. But you know what? I got enough paper left to print one edition, Danny. I'm saving it for Sid Crocket's obituary. I hope I have enough type to print what a lousy, thieving, murdering skunk he is. You can tell him I said that, Danny."

"You can tell him yourself, Mr. Parch," said the bartender.

"I have," said Jack Parch. "I'm not afraid of that son."

Mike felt the strong juices begin to flow in him again. "To hell with Crocket," he said softly. "Have a beer with me and we'll drink to his downfall."

Those sunken, resentful eyes were turned on Mike and he could feel their impact.

"I didn't come in here to cadge a drink," Parch said. "I'm not an object of charity. And don't get the idea, young man, that because this big ox turned me down, that I'm without friends and influence in this Territory. Besides, beer's for men your size. I'm all brains and brains need whiskey, sir. Thank you just the same."

He turned away, sniffed disdainfully at the bartender and strode out of the place, teetering and wobbling a little on his bandy legs.

"Who," Mike asked the bartender, "is that fire-eater?"

"He used to run a newspaper," the bar-

keep said. "The Yellow Hill *Beacon*. But he ain't no fire-eater. He's just big-mouthed. He found out Sid wouldn't lay a hand on him because he's so little, so he keeps shooting off his mouth. And he only does that when he's drunk. When he's sober he'll run across the street to keep from walking past Sid's shadow."

Mike finished his beer, stood there a minute, then bought a bottle of whiskey and walked out. He found the *Beacon* office in the two hundred block on Main Street. It was a small store building. The blinds were drawn. The place looked deserted.

The door was unlocked and Mike let himself in. There was a rough counter and a gate at one end. Behind the counter was a desk and back of that a press and several type cases and a setting stone, all almost merged in a litter of paper and trash. The stale air was rank and heavy with the mingled odors of whiskey, tobacco smoke and printer's ink.

Parch sat slumped on his spine in the high-backed chair before the desk. His bony fingers were laced together, his thumbs and little fingers making steeples. He squinted over these at Mike and let his temper flare.

"The *Beacon* is closed," he said. "Courtesy of that rat Crocket. And there's nothing I want to talk about. Get out."

Mike pushed his way through the gate, placed the bottle of whiskey on the desk in front of Parch and settled himself in the other chair.

Parch looked at the bottle and wrung his hands. "If you're thinking about what I said back there at the Stope, forget it. There's no truth in it. Crocket is a fine gentleman."

"You're a damned liar," Mike said. "Crocket is a crook."

"All right," said Parch. "I'm a damned liar. What shall we do? Pray Sid Crocket drops dead and leaves his fortune to the poor folks he stole it from? Maybe you'd like to buy my paper and go after Crocket. You're big enough in size so he'd pay some attention to you. You might even live as long as a week if you didn't go out except on dark nights."

"What you're saying," said Mike, "is that the printed word won't hurt Crocket, only prod him into doing something about it. You can roll him over with an editorial, but he still lays there like a log, making people walk around him."

Jack Parch grunted. "Now we have a log to walk around. What next?"

"You," said Mike, "can roll the log right out in front of God and all the citizens. When you get it there I'll go to work on it. You whittle a big log up fine enough and the wind will blow it away."

Parch slumped further back on his spine. "There is nothing so pitiful," he said, "than to see a smart young man with an idea he can't make come off. Why, damn it, Crocket's licked bigger men than you without taking off his hat. He might not even bother fighting you. He might just send a couple of his boys around and the next morning you would wake up dead."

"That's where you and the *Beacon* come in," said Mike. "We let the people know it's Crocket I want to take on, not a couple of his boys."

Parch shook his head. "You don't know Crocket. There was a time when he'd fight anyone for money, marbles or chalk. Now he's got enough of all those things and a reputation beside. Suppose we challenge him and he accepts, providing we put up enough of a stake to make it worth his while. What then?"

"We put up," said Mike. "Five million dollars worth of ore against the faulted Bonanza Queen, for which Crockett paid out twenty thousand dollars."

Parch sat up straight. "Who in hell are you?" he asked.

Mike shook his head. "I can't tell you that. Let's just say I'm a friend of Matt Quaintance."

"No," said Parch. "Let's not just say that. I don't even buy a cigar without looking at the name of the brand. You can't tell what's inside by the wrapping. Matt had a lot of friends. So many he never had time to try them all out so he could be sure of their brand. That was the death of Matt Quaintance."

Mike rubbed his hands together. "Do you know a woman named Merry Bond?"

"Her friendship," said Parch, "is one of my few privileges."

"If Merry," said Mike, "wants to tell you who I am, all right. The hell of it is, I don't think she will."

"Why not?"

"She doesn't want me to fight Crocket.

She's afraid of what might happen to me if I do. She wants me to run away with her. She loves me."

"You," said Parch, "are a very fortunate man. And a damned fool if you don't do what Merry wants you to do. Look at me." He made a sweeping motion with his arm. "I turned down a good woman once, to do this. What has it got me?"

"The satisfaction of doing what you had to do," said Mike. "A little glory you wouldn't trade for a pile of gold."

"Glory," said Parch, sneering. "And the loneliness of being alone. I'd trade ten thousand times the glory I've got out of it for brains enough to have chosen the woman, instead. Every time I think about it I try to hide in a bottle."

"Sure," said Mike. "But that's because you're ashamed of a mistake in judgment you once made. She wasn't the woman for you. If she had been, she wouldn't have let you turn her down. She would have helped you fight."

Parch jumped up and grabbed the whiskey bottle by the neck. "Get out," he ordered. "You can't talk about her like that. Get out!"

Mike rose, watching the old man. "You see how it works, Jack. You tell a man the truth about his weakness and he gets mad enough to fight. How about trying that on Crocket?"

"No," Parch said. "I've hurt one woman trying to act like I was two pickhandles wide across the shoulders. I won't help you hurt Merry Bond."

Mike went through the counter gate and paused at the door. "Think it over until eight o'clock tonight, Jack. I'll be back then to find out if you still think all there is to life is hiding in a woman's bedroom."

Parch threw the flask of whiskey. The bottle crashed against the door jamb and exploded, the liquor running down onto the floor.

Mike smiled a little. "See what I mean. That woman would have raised hell with you for doing that, even though I had it coming. But doing it makes the blood heat up, doesn't it? I'll see you around eight."

FOR hours, Mike walked the streets, weaving through a growing, boistrous crowd. He listened to men talk, weighing what they said and how they said it, trying to feel the slightest current that might be set against Crocket. But if there was such, it was held in check by the high dam of Crocket's stature and power.

Around eight o'clock he had supper, though there was not much hunger in him; he was too uncertain of Jack Parch. Parch could help so much, if he would. There would be little use in fighting Crocket unless the town knew what they were fighting for.

When he came to the *Beacon* office again, the place was still dark and, this time the door was locked. Mike beat on the door with his fists and called, loudly, "Parch! Jack Parch! Open up!"

Men stopped on the walk to stare at Mike, but there was no sound from inside. Parch had run out. Mike put his fists in his pocket and walked on down the street, heading for Good Morning's shack. That place, too, was dark and empty and a sense of foreboding came to Mike. He had the feeling that Crocket was reaching out to cut him off before he could even get started.

Midnight came and Good Morning still had not come home. Mike stretched out on the bed to wait. The next he knew the sun was shining and Good Morning was fussing about the stove, making coffee. The old man looked tired to death.

Mike sat up. "Why didn't you wake me?" he demanded. "I've put you out enough as it is."

"How's I going to wake you, suh, when I ain't here?" said Good Morning. "I'se been working, suh. I'se been helping the Lawd peddle he papers."

"Papers?" said Mike.

"The *Beacon,* suh. The wind, he come up strong and the *Beacon* papers begin to blow around. They blow from the roof tops and they blow from between the buildings. They is little papers, suh, and they blow about the street mighty handy like. Mr. Crocket, he the big man, don't like it none. He hire me to pick up the papers so the other man, he don't get to read them none. But the wind, he pretty strong. I get me a handful of them papers and the wind, he blow them right out of my hand. Oh, Lawd, it was a frightenin' night."

Mike was on his feet. "Did you save one of those little papers?"

"Yes, suh," said Good Morning, and handed over a little sheet, hardly bigger

than a letter, but with the *Beacon* masthead. Mike stared.

WHAT KIND OF A MAN IS SID CROCKET?

A FRIEND OF MATT QUAINTANCE WANTS THE PEOPLE OF YELLOW HILL TO KNOW

Crocket is the kind of a man who will lie and cheat and steal to gain a dishonest dollar.

Crocket said Matt Quaintance killed himself. Crocket lies.

Crocket says he wants the Bonanza Queen so he can use the Queen's workings to circulate air into his Big Man Mine. He has paid several minority stockholders, through a crooked lawyer named Fergus, a paltry sum for their shares, which they inherited because of the murder of Mike McCall. The Bonanza Queen is worth millions. Therefore Crocket cheated and robbed these people.

Crocket, through a notorious woman residing at the Hill House, further defamed the character of Mike McCall, Matt's partner. This was done to make McCall's murder appear more logical.

But Crocket can't work his dirty game much longer. He has cast stones at the wrong man. From this day on the *Beacon* will print the truth about Sid Crocket until Crocket agrees to meet me in a public place and be punished by my hands for the crimes he has committed. Crocket can make his own rules, except that he must fight with his bare hands. Speak up, Crocket. Will you fight willingly or do you have to be dragged out of your hole?

A Friend of Matt Quaintance.

Mike folded the paper and placed it in his coat pocket. He looked at Good Morning, but the man pretended to be busy with the stove.

"You know who I am?" Mike asked.

"You ain't never told me," Good Morning said. "If anybody, he was to ask me, who that man, I say, I don't know, he ain't never told me, suh."

"Where's Parch?" Mike asked.

"I don't know, suh," said Good Morning. "Last time I talked with that man he was standing right there next to me. But I ain't where I was then and I reckon he ain't either. The Lawd only knows."

Mike moved to the stove, poured himself a cup of coffee and drank it. When he finished he put the cup aside and laid a hand on the old man's shoulder. "You be careful, friend," he said. "Don't ever speak to me on the street. And I'll never come here again unless I have to. Maybe, some day, you'll be well paid for what you have done for me."

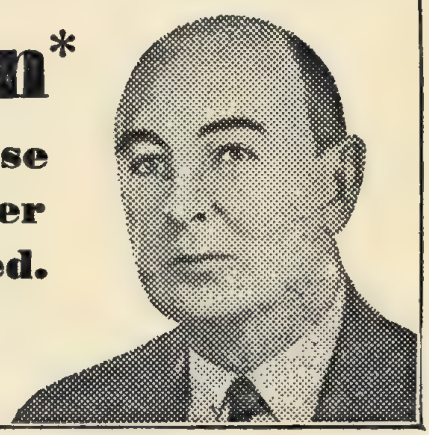
Good Morning bobbed his head and tears came into his eyes. "I'se been well paid, suh. Good Morning, he a proud man. He been trusted by good folks. He been called friend by a good man. May the Lawd walk with you, suh."

Mike left the shack, walked down the smoke-obscured switchyard and turned uptown. Instantly he could sense a difference. Dirty men from the night shift, men who should have been long in bed, still roamed the streets, many with copies of the *Beacon* in their hands. They talked and called back and forth and speculated. A current was beginning to move. The dam had cracked.

BUT the repair crew was at work. Big men, with doubled fists, coursed the walks, trying to start arguments and fights with those who spoke too loudly about Sid Crocket. A half dozen times, on his way up Main Street, Mike heard the sound of blows

Timothy P. Sexton*

has switched to Calvert because Calvert makes a smoother Old Fashioned.



*of 707 People's State Bank, Indianapolis, Ind.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City

and the curses of fighting men. Crowds gathered and swirled. What few policemen Mike saw seemed blind to all this trouble.

Near the *Beacon* office traffic was stalled. Men and their ladies stood up in carriages, looking. Miners perched on ore wagons, shouting. Mike wormed his way through the traffic, afraid of what the yelling was about. The noise died as he broke into the open.

A band of men were leaping from a wagon drawn up before the *Beacon* office, all armed with pickhandles, axes and sledges. Sid Crocket towered among them, his thick arms held over his head for attention.

"Please, boys," he shouted. "Please. Listen to me."

The men with the tools milled about him. "It's no go, Sid," one shouted.

"That little feist can't get by with lies like that," another yelled.

"This is a law-abiding town," Crocket bawled, waving his arms. "I appreciate what you intend to do, but that is not my way. Parch can't hurt me with words. I have nothing to hide. Let him print his lies."

"Bang their heads together, Sid," Mike yelled, from the back of the crowd. "They won't wreck the *Beacon* if you don't want them to."

Crocket's head turned and he tried to pick Mike out, but the crowd was shifting too much.

"You're right," Crocket bellowed. "But how can a man lay hands on his good friends?"

"That's right," shouted a man, raising his sledge. "We're your good friends. We ain't letting any man write lies about you." He let the sledge fly. The big window of the *Beacon* office dissolved.

The wrecking crew surged forward. "No! No!" Crocket roared. With a great display of earnestness, he seized a miner who was struggling to hold back one of the vandals, lifted him by the neck and smashed his face. Bawling something about the police, then, the big man wormed his way through the crowd and disappeared.

Mike made no attempt to interfere; there was too much risk and too little to gain. He had no fear for Jack Parch. Even if the little man had been inside, Mike knew he would have long ago got out the back way. There was nothing to do but stand and watch Crocket's crew destroy the place.

Sledge hammers smashed the *Beacon* press into bits. Type cases were tipped over and demolished. Axes splintered the counter and desk. Men swarmed to the roof and it came down board by board, rafter by rafter. And, when it was done, the wreckers shouldered their tools and marched off in a body, threatening to get their hands on Jack Parch and give him some of the same.

Mike hung around for an hour, wondering about Parch. The crowd finally drifted away. Small boys came to poke about the wreckage, picking up pieces of type and scraps of wood and metal, the junk that small boys cherish.

Mike moved on up the street then, sorry now that he had egged old Parch into this. Parch had gone whole hog with that first edition. He had outdone himself, stung Crocket so hard that he had brought the wrath of Crocket down on his own head. Mike took no stock in Crocket's pretense of trying to save the *Beacon* plant.

Fists in his pockets, Mike trudged up the Hill, studying the workings. He watched the steel dump cars come out of the Big Man Mine to spill their rich loads into an endless string of ore wagons. It was fine ore, part of it no doubt, coming from the Bonanza Queen.

The Bonanza Queen was shut tight. When Mike approached the buildings a man stepped from the office shack and waved a rifle.

"Nothing doing here, Buck," the man said. "Keep off."

IN THE middle of the afternoon, Mike loitered across the street from the Hill House. Will Fergus, a dispatch case under his arm, came down the street and hurried into the building. Halstead came out, stood a moment teetering on his small feet and finally walked away, as if he had come to some decision.

Good Morning came slowly down the street, his bootjack box slung over a bent shoulder. "Shine, suh!" Good Morning cried. "Shine, suh. One dime."

When no one hailed him for his services, he turned between two buildings. And, when he was gone, Mike noticed a sheaf of papers lying on the walk near the opening down which the darky had disappeared.

A passing miner kicked the papers with his foot, scattering them, turning them over to reveal bold printing. The miner stooped, snatched a paper from the walk and loosed a wild yell.

"Hey! Here's the *Beacon*. The *Beacon's* out again!"

Mike darted across the street, fought with a suddenly scrambling mob of men, retrieved one of the papers and hurried back across the street. Down, a half block, another crowd was gathering and Good Morning was limping along the walk, calling for a customer. Mike unfolded the sheet and read:

CROCKET IS PROVING HIMSELF

This morning, when the *Beacon* printed certain facts about Sid Crocket, as set down by a friend of Matt Quaintance, Mr. Crocket took instant steps, proving his fear of being uncovered and exposed.

Crocket called in his hatchetmen.

Crocket told them to raise a gang from the mines and wreck the *Beacon* office.

Crocket, in an obvious attempt to ingratiate himself to the people of Yellow Hill, made a pretense of trying to stop this vandalism. But when he was asked by a man in the crowd to stop the very thing he had planned, to use his great size and boasted fighting qualities, Crocket replied that he could not raise a hand to a friend. While pretending to be a law abiding citizen, Crocket, at the same time, admitted great friendship for a mob of lawbreakers. The only man Crocket raised a hand to was an innocent, fairminded bystander who tried to hold back one of the wrecking crew.

The *Beacon* plant is now in ruins, but the voice of the *Beacon* is not stilled. Knowing Crocket for the kind of man he is, the *Beacon* editor had moved enough equipment away before Crocket could strike. The *Beacon* will continue to expose Crocket until Crocket agrees to fight in public and defend his honor with his hands.

The *Beacon* repeats again that Crocket is a liar, a cheat and a murderer.

The *Beacon* claims that Matt Quaintance did not commit suicide. The note Matt left was not written by Matt's own hand. Who wrote it? Crocket? Who actually murdered Mike McCall? Crocket?

How much more do you want, Crocket? How many names does a man have to call you before you'll fight. You're showing up pretty yellow right now. If you don't fight soon, the town will know what you are. They might even give you a ride out of town, on a rough rail, with a pot of hot tar and a sack of feathers at the end of the street. Don't tempt them too far, Sid.

A Friend of Matt's

Mike, the paper held in his hand, looked up and down the street. Knots of men were gathered all over now. Harvey Burls went puffing by to cross the street and disappear into Hill House. Burls had a copy of the *Beacon* in his pudgy hand.

A big, hot-eyed man jostled Mike and yelled, "You don't believe that tripe, do you?"

"Every word of it," said Mike.

The man swung. Mike ducked and brought up a savage, smashing right that spun the man around and draped him unconscious and bleeding over a hitching rack. A drunk, a copy of the *Beacon* clutched in his fist, staggered up to peer at the moaning figure.

"Wha's the matter with him?" the drunk demanded.

"He didn't like what I was reading," said Mike.

"Oh, he didn't, did he," shouted the drunk. He kicked out at the unconscious man, fell down and got slowly to his feet again. "Good for you! By God, I'm beginning to believe this stuff about Crocket." Then he staggered on, staring at his copy of the *Beacon*, held upside down.

Mike put the paper in his pocket and moved on, feeling the strong juices flowing in him again. This was more like it. Had to find Parch now. To that end he went hunting Good Morning. The old bootblack surely must know where Parch was hiding out. It was a sure bet Good Morning was scattering those sheets about.

Mike could not find Good Morning on the streets, nor had the old man returned to his shack by nine o'clock that night. Mike went back uptown. Excitement ran high. The current was running stronger. Men were talking boldly about Crocket.

"Maybe Crocket is yellow," Mike remarked to a man idling before the Elkhorn Bar.

"Won't be no maybe if he don't fight. A man calls you names and you fight, don't you? Maybe a dose of tar and feathers is what that man needs."

This was the way it was in a copper camp. Childishness and manliness all mixed

up in a breed of tough men who would not take anything from anyone, yet follow a cause blindly, right or wrong. Hard men, they expected hardness in every other man, great or small, bright or stupid. Toughness was a sixth sense to these men. They needed it to live their dangerous game.

Later, Mike found himself on Ore Street without wanting to admit how he got there. It was late now and all the lights were out in the monotonously alike houses. Even Merry Bond's house was dark. Mike paused by the front gate, feeling suddenly lonely, yet afraid to go in. It would be nice to talk with Merry, to be near her for a moment, even though she would only talk about going away and grow angry when he would not. Thinking about her, he heard Harvey Burls wheezing up, just in time.

Mike vaulted the fence and ran to the corner of the house. Burls came to the gate and stopped, staring suspiciously into the darkness, mumbling to himself. After a wait, he went on in and to the door. His knock was soft.

Mike heard light footsteps in the house, a pause, then the sound of the door opening an inch or two.

"Who is it?" Merry Bond asked.

"Harvey," the fat man whispered hoarsely. "Let me come in."

"I can't," Merry said. "I'm undressed and tired."

"I have to come in," Burls said. "I can't talk out here. Hell, we're going to be married in a few days, anyway, ain't we?"

Peering around the corner, Mike saw Burls put his weight against the door. He heard Merry gasp, but before he could move to help, Burls was backing away, he did not have the nerve to force his way in.

"You try that again," Merry said, "and that will be the end. What's so important you can't tell me standing where you are. No one can hear."

BURLS looked all around. "I got to be damned careful," he whispered. "Everything gets around. Only Sid and Will and Paul and me and the Big Man boss knows about that ore of Matt's we got blocked out. The boys who did the work on it were all killed in a bad powder blast, sort of an accident. Yet this friend of Matt's, who's writing in the paper, he knows that the Bonanza Queen is rich."

"Maybe you think I'm telling him," Merry said coldly. "Maybe you don't want me to go around with you anymore."

"Now, Merry," said Burls petulantly. "Don't talk like that. What I want to tell you is that this is about over. We got a big gang out hunting for Parch. They're going through every building basement and every boxcar on the tracks. They're even looking out in the country for him. And we got a line on Matt's friend. He's a dark-eyed, big fellow with a black beard. Remember the man who plowed into me. That's him."

"That's who?" Merry said.

"Matt's friend. There's no doubt of it. He was in the Big Stope when Parch came in the other day. He made some remark to Parch about Sid, bought a bottle and followed Sid out. The bartender remembers all about it. Right after that this blackmail starts. But we'll find that man soon enough and everything will be all right. This town forgets quick. In a week Sid will be riding high again."

"Good," Merry said, her voice curiously flat. "Then you'll really be a rich man."

"A million dollars rich," Burls enthused, beginning to breathe fast. "And it's all for you. Can't I come in just a minute? I won't touch you. I'll just look."

Mike had to hold himself in; he could barely restrain himself from rushing Burls and using his fists. But Burls had become dangerous now. He, better than anyone else, would remember the man with the beard.

"No." Merry said. "Not tonight. It's just that I'm too tired. Some other time."

"Well," Burls said thickly, "don't mention this to anyone. I'll see you tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night," Merry said.

The fat man turned away and wheezed back toward town. Mike waited until the sound of his heavy tread had died away, then slid toward the door. It swung open for him before he could knock.

"Come in," Merry said. "Quick. That Burls . . . I was afraid. I saw your shadow pass the window."

"Now you even know my shadow," Mike chided. "A man could have no secrets with you around."

She caught him and pulled him close to her. She was fully clothed, but he could

feel her heart pounding violently. He held her tight and he could not help himself for a long while. But finally he pushed her roughly away.

"That's no good," he said. "Enough of that and I'd be afraid to fight Crocket."

"Then I wish you'd take enough," she cried. "You heard Burls. You don't dare show yourself now. You don't dare show yourself in that beard and if you shave it off one of them is bound to recognize you."

"No use arguing with him, girl." It was Jack Parch, talking from a dark corner of the room, his voice sharp and bitter. "McCall's a tough nut. He'd sooner wallow on bloody ground, holding a man by the throat, than have a woman's soft arms around his own neck. He's a damned fool."

"Stop that talk," Merry said. "It's for Mike to decide."

"Parch," Mike said, "what are you doing here?"

"Temporary offices of the *Beacon*," said Jack Parch. He struck a match and puffed a cigar alight, the yellow glow striking highlights from his deep-set, fanatical eyes.

"Damn you!" said Mike, angrily. "Of all the places to pick. If Crocket ever tracks you down, he'd hurt Merry, too."

"You said," said Parch jeering, "that a good woman would insist on fighting beside the man she loved. How does it feel to cause a woman trouble, McCall? Is it nice?"

"There's no sense in it," Mike said. "We'll get out of here. Merry had no business letting you move in here in the first place."

"I insisted he move in here," said Merry. "Where else could he be safe? And how else could I have helped you to do what you are trying to do? I'm the only one who has contact with Crocket, through Burls."

Jack Parch laughed at Mike's silence. "You're in it up to your neck, McCall. But don't worry too much. I've got a sense about these things. This business will be soon over. One more shot will crack Crocket wide open. It better had. There's little paper left and we won't dare buy more."

"Then lets set it up," Merry said. "You heard what Burls said about what happened to the miners who uncovered the Bonanza Queen vein. That was no accident. Print that."

"Sure," said Mike. "Print that and Crocket will know exactly where to look. Burls isn't stupid. He just acts like a whining boy so some woman will mother him and maybe pet him a little. Crocket wouldn't have him around if he wasn't smart. Print what happened to me the night I came here. If anything will smoke Crocket out, knowing I'm not dead might do the trick."

"Can you remember what Fergus and the others said?" Parch asked.

"Every word of it."

When Mike had told them all about it, there was the sound of a carpet being thrown back and the creak of little-used hinges. Then Parch's cigar coal sank slowly from sight, a match was struck and candle light glowed up through a trap door. Mike stared down. In a tiny basement was a hand press, a few cases of type and a small supply of cut sheets, all that was left of the *Beacon*.

"It's too bad," said Mike, "about what happened uptown. I'm sorry."

Parch took the cigar from his teeth and looked up, a strange expression on his face. "Don't be," he said. "That's one of those little bits of glory you talked about. It's happened to me before. But this time I feel pretty wide across the pants about it."

"When you get the paper set," said Mike, "I'll turn the press."

"No," said Parch. "Good Morning will be here to do that. He's up now hanging around the police station, trying to pick up some news from Billy Garth. You're the fighting man, remember? Get some sleep." He cocked his head. "Make him get some sleep, Merry."

Merry's hand fell on Mike's arm and she tugged him toward the bedroom. She helped him off with his coat, stooped and untied his shoes. He argued with her, but she pretended not to hear.

"You've gone through too much already," she pointed out. "You were nearly beat to death two weeks ago. You can't work all night and miss your sleep and be in shape to fight that man."

Mike caught her arms and lifted her up to face him. Even in the darkness he had the illusion he could see her plainly, her face wan from worrying too much, her eyes dull from lack of sleep and work. Parch was right about a woman's place, but how could it be helped?

"You think I have a chance, Merry?" he asked her. "You think I can beat Crocket?"

Her body stiffened in his hands. "Yes," she said. "You can beat Crocket. You can beat anyone."

Mike shook her roughly. He felt good. She had meant those words, it was easy to tell that. And he suddenly realized why Jack Parch had almost been a failure. The man had no such faith as this to bolster his own courage, no one to turn to in the dark hours.

CHAPTER FOUR

Counter Challenger

ONCE or twice during the night, Mike woke to hear the muted clinking of the hand press in the basement. The last edition of the Beacon was going out. When he came wide awake it was morning.

Mike got up, washed himself in the basin on the dresser and went out into the living room. It was empty, but pans rattled in the kitchen and he went out there. Parch was there alone, sleepy-eyed, cooking eggs and bacon.

"About time," Parch grumbled. "I need a turn at that bed, myself."

"Where's Merry?" Mike asked.

"Peddling papers," Parch said. "After that she's calling on Anny Ferrin and then Burls will probably catch her and slobber over her, someplace.

"Let's see a copy of the paper," said Mike.

"Forgot to keep a copy," said Parch. "It was good though."

"You didn't mention anything that Burls had said?"

"Can't remember," said Parch. "I was pretty tired. Why don't you shave off those whiskers? Razor's on the shelf there."

"If you've written anything to get Merry in trouble—" Mike said.

"Don't threaten me!" Parch snapped. "Of course I wrote that Burls story. It was our Sunday punch. And if you don't like what I write why, damn it, get yourself another editor! One with paper to print on. We're out."

Parch slammed platters of food on the table and they ate. When they were finished, the old man staggered into the bedroom, closing the door behind him and Mike knew Parch was not only exhausted but deeply worried.

It was four o'clock when Merry let herself in, her arms loaded down with food. She, too, looked tired and worried. Parch came out of the bedroom when he heard her, shooting questions at her, but she took time to smile at Mike and touch his smoothly-shaven face before she would answer either of them.

"The town's jumping like a pan of popcorn," she finally said. "A half dozen men walked back and forth in front of Hill House, carrying a rail on their shoulders and it started a fight. So far Crocket hasn't said a word. But there's something in the air."

"What?" Mike asked.

"I don't know. Burls met me on the street and insisted I eat dinner with him. He didn't take me to Hill House, as usual. He took me to that woman's place on Fourth Street. He acted funny. When I tried to make him stop pawing my legs under the table, he laughed at me. He asked me who I thought I was, to feel so high and mighty."

"After Crocket," said Mike, "we'll teach Burls some manners."

Merry looked down at the floor. "After Crocket. I wonder what it will be like, then."

"Cleaner," said Mike. "A happier place."

Later, after supper, they sat talking, the window shades pulled down and the lamp turned low, after darkness came. Both Merry and the newspaper man readily admitted having used Burl's story, as well as Mike's own experience, in the last edition. Parch had actually accused Crocket of murdering the miners in order to keep his secret of the Bonanza Queen's faulted vein. Mike could do no more than scold them; the thing was done, the risk taken. But it worried him. He jumped up when a light scratching came at the back door.

Parch got up and headed for the kitchen. Merry said, "That will be Good Morning. He always comes in that way. Maybe he's got news."

Parch came back with Good Morning shuffling behind him. The darky's lips sagged and the whites of his eyes showed round and large. He laid a folded newspaper on the table, by the lamp.

"That here," he said, "he a copy of the *Clarion*. He an extra paper. Mr. Crocket give his answer, suhs."

Parch unfolded the sheet. Under a blazing headline,

CROCKET SPEAKS!

was a letter addressed,

TO MATT'S FRIEND

They stood together and read the bold type and Mike felt a sick, weakening feeling run through him. Even anger could not throw it off. The printed letter said:

I, Sid Crocket, can now answer the charges against me.

It has been claimed that the suicide note left by Matt Quaintance was not written by Matt, himself. That is true. Matt did not commit suicide. He was murdered. But I did not write the note. Matt Quaintance's murderer wrote the note. This fact has always been known to the police.

There is not five million dollars worth of ore blocked out in the Bonanza Queen. That was a lie, told along with many others to a certain cheap woman of this town in an effort to trap the cold-blooded killer of Matt Quaintance.

Many times my good friend Matt expressed a fear to me that his partner, Mike McCall, would kill him. Matt also suspected a certain young woman of working with McCall and of plotting his, Matt's death. I am sorry now that I did not believe this to be possible. Had I believed I might have prevented a murder.

On the night Matt Quaintance was shot to death, a man and a woman ran from Matt's room. They were seen by many persons. The woman was recognized by all, but the man was a stranger to Yellow Hill. After a conference with Chief of Police Galbraith, it was decided to leave the woman at large, but to watch her, constantly, in the hope the stranger would be seen again in her company. Toward that end, Chief Galbraith and myself pretended to believe the suicide note was real, hoping that such pretension would make the murderers careless.

Unfortunately, the woman gave us the slip and left town. But she returned by train, two weeks ago, in company with a man calling himself Randall, the same man our witnessess had seen running from Matt's room the night that fine man was murdered. Three of these witnesses, Fergus, Halstead and Burls, managed to separate the pair. Later, when we accused Randall of being Mike McCall, he leaped upon us, held us at bay with drawn gun and made good his escape. The next morning, a body found dressed in the clothes McCall had been wearing, was found in the alley. Again I cautioned Chief Galbraith to patience and suggested we bury this dead man and let it be known and assumed McCall had been found dead. This was done in an effort to flush McCall into the open again.

I am now convinced that this so-called 'Friend Of Matt's' is none other than our friend, Mike McCall, Matt's murderer. No one but McCall could know so much about events, even though these events have been twisted by a warped and crooked brain to try and show me in a bad light and to ruin my reputation as a fair and honest man. Further, only through his feminine accomplice could McCall have learned the lies we have been telling his accomplice, in an effort to trap them both.

McCall, naming himself a friend of Matt's, has challenged me to a fight. I accept his challenge. Nothing would please me more than to get my hands on Matt's murderer. In the morning I shall have a ring built in the Square. As I have been generously allowed to make the rules, this, then, shall be them. Bare hands and no holds barred. And no interference until the winner has left the ring. Come out and fight, McCall. Come out and let me punish you as you deserve to be punished, before the whole town. Afterward, I shall turn you over to the police and furnish the witnesses who will tighten the noose about your neck.

Sid Crocket.

MERRY'S shoulders drooped and her voice was flat. "I hate to say it," she said, "but I told you. Crocket is too big for little people like us."

Jack Parch fished a stogie from his vest pocket and tried to light it, but his hand shook too much. "There's a weapon they use in Australia," he said. "The boomerang. You throw it and if you miss what you try for, the thing will come back and knock your damned head off if you don't watch out."

Mike finally looked up at Merry. "All right," he said. "Pack your things. Dig up what money you have around. You won't be coming back."

"Thank god," she said, and flew into her bedroom.

Good Morning turned his back and mumbled to himself. Parch finally got his stogie lit and smoked furiously, making funny little noises in his throat. Merry came out in a few minutes with a suitcase. Mike's coat and the old man's coat lay over her arm.

"I'm ready," she said. "Let's hurry, all of us, while there's still time."

Mike took the coats from her arm and laid them aside. He relieved her of the suitcase and handed it to Good Morning.

"Now, listen," he said. "Jack, you and Merry hit for the depot. Travel the alleys. Keep in the dark when you get to the station. When the westbound train pulls in, Good Morning will go to the head end and raise a commotion."

"I can raise a tolerable fine commotion, suh," said Good Morning.

"Fine," said Mike. "Merry, and you, Jack, when Good Morning attracts everyone's attention, get on that train and hide in the washrooms until it pulls out. Go to San Francisco. There's a Pacific Hotel on Powell Street. You might inquire for me there, some day. There's a chance I'll make it."

Merry said, "No!" and tried to shrug out of her own coat. Parch caught her shoulders and shook her violently.

"One fool is enough in this crowd," the old man admonished her. "Don't you see what he's doing? He's telling you to get the hell out of here, that he doesn't want you around anymore. He'd sooner fight Crocket than do anything else. Only God can stop him and God hasn't looked at this town since it started. You've got to go, Merry. If you do there's a chance in a million that Mike might turn up some day in San Francisco. If you stay here and make him worry about you, he'll have no chance at all."

"There must be some way," Merry cried. "Matt had a lot of friends in this town. They—"

"And they'll all be against Mike now," Parch pointed out.

Merry looked at Mike and tears rolled down her cheeks. "Please, Mike," she begged. "You'll need someone."

Mike shook his head.

"I'll stay with him," said Parch. "I'll do what I can."

"No," said Mike. "You go too."

Parch said, "Don't tell me what to do." He turned out the lamp, opened the door a crack and looked out. "All right," he whispered, when he was satisfied. "Time to go, Merry. God bless you, and good luck."

Mike felt warm hands reaching for his face. He caught them, held them a moment and pushed them away. "Later," he said, "in San Francisco."

She murmured something he did not understand, then he saw her shadow appear in the door and vanish. Good Morning followed her. Parch closed the door and shot the bolt.

Mike lit the lamp again, found pen and paper, sat down at the table and wrote at length. After he had signed the document, he handed Parch the pen and said, "Sign this as a witness, Jack."

The old man took the pen and stared at the paper. "The last will and testament of Mike McCall."

"Crocket," said Mike, "admits I'm McCall, so he admits to owning only the minority share of the Bonanza Queen. I have willed Merry half and you and the others equal shares of my seventy-five per cent."

"You fool," said Parch. "Don't you remember the terms that fellow laid down? No interference until the victor leaves the ring. When Crocket leaves it you'll be dead. Even Matt wouldn't be able to recognize you. Once you're dead, Crocket can simply say he's mistaken about your identity. You're not McCall, so his steal still stands up good. Who could call him a liar? Merry?"

Mike shook his head. "It's the best I can do."

"The best you can do," murmured Parch. "Good God Almighty."

A LITTLE before noon the next morning Jack Parch opened the door and peeked out into the street. "Nobody in sight," he said. "The smoke's thinned and I can't feel the mills stamping. That means everything's shut down. This is one hell of a crazy town, all right. Everybody knocking off work to see a fight when they should know damned well nobody will show up."

"Crocket will be there," said Mike. "He'll have to be there to make himself look good."

"Well," said Parch, "if you want to al-

so make him feel good, let's go. It's time."

Mike walked out the door and Jack Parch followed. The street was deserted. But when they came to the gate two policemen broke from the house next door and two more came from across the street, Harvey Burls puffing after them.

"Watch them," ordered Burls. "Don't let them make a break for it."

The four officers closed in on Mike and the old man. Billy Garth was one of them, expressionless and wooden.

"Is Crocket even afraid to fight?" Mike asked him.

"No," said Garth. "He wants to, McCall. He wants to be sure of you."

"Stop talking with those two," ordered Burls. "One of you come with me. I want that woman, too."

He paddled across Merry's front yard and let himself into the house, one of the officers following. That meant they had not caught Merry. She had gotten away. Mike felt better.

Burls came puffing back, red-faced and angry. "Where is she?" he shouted at Mike. "Where did she go?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, you fat slob," Mike snapped.

"By God, we'll find her," said Burls. "I ain't the damned fool she thinks I am. She's the fool. She's been swallowing every lie I handed her. We'll find her, too. When we do, maybe she'll be glad to play around with me. And without me marrying her, too."

Mike hit Burls. All the disgust he had for the man went into a savage blow that smashed and smeared Burls' face and dumped him, writhing, onto his back.

Mike was reaching for the man again when a night stick crashed against the back of his head, driving him to his hands and knees and sending a wave of weakness and nausea through him. From far off, Bill Garth's voice came, "You do that again, Malone and, by God, I'll kill you. Burls had that coming, the dirty-mouthed slob."

"Sounds like you're for McCall," someone said. "We'll let the chief know about that. You boys get McCall moving. If he don't come easy, bust him again. Sid will appreciate it. Billy, you help Burls."

"Like hell," said Garth. "Let him lay. Maybe some dog will think he's a handy rock. You can tell that to the chief, too."

Mike felt hands lift him and hurry him along. Motion cleared his head, but there was a dull throbbing inside him and warm blood ran down his neck. When he became aware that Jack Parch was brushing at him with a handkerchief, he removed his coat, threw it away and took off his shirt to make a wad of cloth to hold against his split scalp.

The Square was jammed with men. Over their heads loomed the high-built, bunting-bedecked ring Crocket had caused to be built. A ring no more than ten feet square in which a man would have no chance to use speed and science against Crocket's bulk and strength.

When they came up against the milling, muttering crowd, Garth punched out with his club and raised his voice. "Let us through, boys," he ordered. "We got McCall. Let's see some fun now."

Mike's name was taken up and it ran over the spectators like fast water spilling over a rocky stream bed. Men leaped in the air for a look at him. Billy Garth pushed ahead, opening a way, Mike and

Jack Parch following behind him, Parch looking insolently at the staring men who lined the way.

Mike threw aside his shirt and it was instantly trampled by the men closing in behind them. And that closing gave Mike a sense of being trapped. This was a one-way walk.

"McCall! McCall!" they shouted.

"They've found McCall. They're bringing McCall to fight."

"Let Crocket have him."

"Get ready, Sid. The cops got McCall and Parch, both!"

Will Fergus appeared in the ring. He looked and then talked excitedly down to someone below.

The nearer Mike came to the ring, the more eager he became. At last they broke through the inner ring of men who were pushing back against the pressure of the crowd lest they be shoved forward so close they could not see above the high rising floor.

In this clear space stood an enormous, sun-bonneted woman. She was six feet tall, monstrous in proportion, with thick ankles and the heavy, powerful arms of a blacksmith.

"Anny Ferrin!" said Garth. "And what are you doing here?"

"I've come to see me a fight, you lazy patrolman, you," she shouted. "Ah, there's the fine lad, now. Climb up there, Mike McCall, and beat the beer out through the hide of the shanty scum."

"Go on, Mike," Parch urged. "Get up there before Crocket gets in there first and uses his feet on you while you're coming in."

Mike took a quick step, leaped, caught the lower rope and drew himself up. Crocket was already squirming through the ropes across the ring. He wore heavy hob-nailed, coppertoed shoes and light trousers. He was naked from the waist up, his thick torso glistening with oil, his curly brown hair close-cropped. His heavy lips were parted and his teeth were showing in a hard smile.

Mike kept right on going across the ring. Crocket straightened. Mike dropped his left shoulder and whipped in a solid blow, his fist smashing against Crocket's opened lips. A solid wall of sound lifted from the gathered mob. This was it.

CROCKET'S round head jolted back, a surprised look came into his eyes and his tongue darted out to taste the salty blood upon his crushed lips. Mike brought up a hard right and caught Crocket high on the cheek. The big man bellowed like a bull, threw his weight back against the tight-stretched ropes and bounded forward, striking out with both fists at once, butting with his head and trying for Mike's groin, at the same time, with a savagely lifted knee.

Mike swayed away from Crocket's knee; that would been the most punishing, had it landed. But Crocket's pushing fists struck his chest like two battering rams and Crocket's lowered head caught Mike on one side of the throat. Then Crocket's whole, massive weight fell against Mike and he went down on his back, jarring the ring.

The breath *whooshed* out of him. He felt sick from that butt on the throat and he could barely swallow or see. It was the glitter of sunlight striking off the hobnails of Crocket's boots that attracted his attention. The big man had leaped high in the air and was coming down to finish him.

"Kill him now, Sid!" Will Fergus was screaming. "Kill him!"

Mike rolled, drew up his knees and lashed out with both feet as Crocket came down. Mike's heels caught Crocket just over the kneecaps. Bellowing, Crocket fell forward across Mike's legs and Mike reached for the big man's throat, sinking his fingers deep, jerking his legs from beneath Crocket, at the same time.

Crocket reached up and caught Mike's wrists and Mike was suddenly afraid. Sid had strength beyond reason. He tore Mike's hand away from his throat, worked his heavy thumbs up into Mike's palms and began slowly to bend Mike's wrists back, all this time numbing Mike's arms with that terrible grip.

Mike worked up, slid one leg back and drove a knee into Crocket's ribs with all he had. The big man grunted, let go his grip and doubled up. Mike stood up to use his feet, but Crocket dove like a snake for his legs.

Mike had to jump away, giving Crocket time to get up and there was no place to go in this tiny ring—Crocket seemed to fill it with his bulk. When Crocket closed

in, Mike threw slugging punches at the man's face, a flurry of savage rights and lefts, smashing, meaty blows Mike could feel clear up to his shoulders. He cut open the corner of Crocket's right eye. He made blood spurt from Crocket's nose. He flattened Crocket's mouth again and tore the man's ear slightly with a glancing blow.

Crocket waded right on in, cursing Mike monotonously. Ponderously, he drove in smashing blows of his own. Mike could not duck them all. He caught one on the side of the face that drove his head almost over on his shoulder. In desperation, Mike slipped to one side and Crocket stomped down with a heavy boot, dragging the metal-edged sole down along Mike's leg, tearing off a strip of hide.

Mike could hear nothing now. He could see nothing except Crocket's bloody face. He whipped in a long, looping left and felt Crocket's nose give. He took a jolting blow under the heart that made his knees rubbery. He fell back and Crocket came after him, reaching out with his huge hands for Mike's throat, trying to kill, wanting to so bad he did not look human.

Mike levered himself off the ropes, doubled over and went in low, driving the point of his shoulder into the little roll of fat hanging over Crocket's belt. Crocket grunted like an outraged bull and bent over, trying to grab Mike's body so he could hold him and fall on top of him.

But there was too much blood and sweat now. Mike squirmed away and brought his knee up viciously, catching Crocket under the wishbone, but slipping and falling, laying himself wide open, unable for the moment to move. Crocket tried to kick him in the head, but that knee had staggered the big man too much. The best he could do was stand there, his feet planted wide apart, his great chest heaving, his breath rasping hoarsely in his throat.

Mike reached for the ring ropes and dragged himself erect. Sweat stung his eyes and the taste of blood was in his mouth. He wanted to rest. His chest ached, his stomach seemed tied up in a knot, his fists were like lead weights hanging on the end of numb arms. He hurt all over where Crocket had hit him and he wanted to quit. He was so far gone the crowd could tell.

"Finish him, Sid!" someone screamed. "Finish him up. He's done. You got him."

Mike shut his mouth tight, dropped his hand from the rope and rocked Crocket with a hard right. Then a left. The blows infuriated the big man; he had thought the fight was going his way. He lowered his head and bored in.

Mike set himself and held his ground. He could sense a weakening of Crocket's power now, the fast pace had told on the big man and this fast pace would have to go on—that was Mike's only chance. Both of their bodies were punished enough; what was inside of them was taking the beating now, the toughness and the leather in them, their souls.

Toe to toe, Mike beat at Crocket's bloody face, then crouched and drove blow after blow into Crocket's belly. Crocket hit back. Mike could feel the blows, feel his strength going and it slowly came to him that Crocket could not be beat. The man was big and the man was tough. Mike settled himself again, knowing he must be eventually licked, willing to admit it, but unwilling to go down any other way but fighting. This was the last call on what strength there was left.

MIKE used it all. And when it was gone, when he felt he could not raise his hands again, it was Crocket who tried to turn away, pawing blindly at the air, staggering, making funny noises with his mouth. Mike stumbled after him. The tiny ring seemed acres big now, a mile across.

Crocket reeled into a corner and turned around. Mike fell against him. For a moment they leaned together, like two bloody sloths met in death battle in some primeval swamp. They were even now. The crowd could sense that. Whoever had it in him would win. There was no shouting now, only an awful silent straining, an awesome wondering.

Crocket lifted a fist first and tried to paw at Mike. Mike pushed himself away, stepped back, dropped his right fist almost to the ring floor and let it go. His fist made a wet, smashing sound against Crocket's jaw. Crocket tried to turn away. He tried to speak, but there was no voice left in him. Then he went heavily down. Beaten fair and square, by his own rules. But still the winner.

Mike backed to the center of the ring and stood there, head down, arms hanging, chest heaving, sick at his stomach. There was no noise. By all the rules laid down by Crocket himself, no one was to come into the ring until the victor gave permission. Yet a beefy man in a policeman's uniform was boosted up and he came on in, pistol in hand. Chief Galbraith.

"All right, McCall," he said. "Don't move. I'm arresting you for the murder of Matt Quaintance."

"Listen to the likes of him!" roared Anny Ferrin, lumbering into Mike's vision. "I've washed Matt Quaintance's socks for three long years and never but a good word did that fine man have for Mike McCall. Do you think the fine good people of Yellow Hill are taking the word of a Crocket against the word of Matt?"

"You keep your big mouth shut," Galbraith warned. "Don't interfere."

"Bah!" said Anny. She lashed out with an enormous set of washboard reddened knuckles, a terrible blow that made a red smear of Galbraith's face and knocked him right out through the ropes.

"There's your rotten law!" Anny bellowed, waving her big fists. "Now come on with you, me honest lads. We'll skin the rest of Crocket's crooks!"

In a daze, Mike watched her scoot out through the ropes and jump down, her skirts flying as she waded in. Below him, men swirled and yelled, came together and broke apart, their appetite for blood whetted by the terrible fight they had just witnessed and further aroused by the example of the fighting Irish washerwoman.

What astonished Mike was the order of the thing. A solid block of fighting men, led by Anny Ferrin and Billy Garth, were moving relentlessly across the Square, accepting recruits to their cause and trampling down the rest. It was an ugly, yet glorious thing to see. The honest men of Yellow Hill were on the march.

Mike forced himself to move, trying to follow Anny, afraid of her. Hands grabbed him and hauled him back and Jack Parch was suddenly dancing around, almost inarticulate. "I saw it!" he yelled. "By God, I saw it. You fighting son-of-a-gun."

"I saw it too, Mike," said a soft voice in his ear and a cold towel was pressed against his face, shocking back his wavering consciousness. "You were great. You'll always be great."

Mike reached up and caught Merry Bond's hand. "You didn't go."

"Did you think I would?"

"No," said Mike. "No, I didn't think you would."

Hands reached into the ring and dragged Sid Crocket out. Men lifted him to their shoulders and staggered toward the Hill, Will Fergus urging them on. They did not get far. Anny's mob grown to enormous proportions now, caught up with them, ran over them and went on, looking for more.

Mike pulled Merry around and held her so she could not see. "That Anny Ferrin," he said. "She's great. You'd think she'd planned this thing."

"She did," said Merry. "I went to her last night. You remember I said there must be some way, that Matt had lots of friends?"

"Yes," said Mike. "Matt was a great man. He made friends wherever he went."

"That's right," said Merry. "So all of last night, Anny went from house to house, calling on Matt's friends, asking them all one question. Would such a fine man as Matt tell only Crocket that you wanted to kill him while he told everyone else what a fine man you were? That was it, Mike. Crocket's mistake. Yes, Anny did a lot, but it was your licking Crocket that turned the tide.

Mike shook his head. The mob was back now, swirling about the ring, shouting and calling up to Mike, hailing him. Then Good Morning's voice was rising, pleading.

"Let me through there, gentlemen. Let me drive the carriage through for the great man and his lady."

They parted good naturedly and Good Morning, in bright red coat and high silk hat, drove a shiny carriage up, a shiny black carriage pulled by a matched gray team.

"This outfit, suh," he said, grinning up at Mike, "is for the champion of the world. I figured you'd be wishing to move about mighty fast. Ain't nothing like a good team of grays for that, suh."

Mike helped Merry down and into the carriage and climbed in after her. There was a lot to do and we was very tired.

THE END

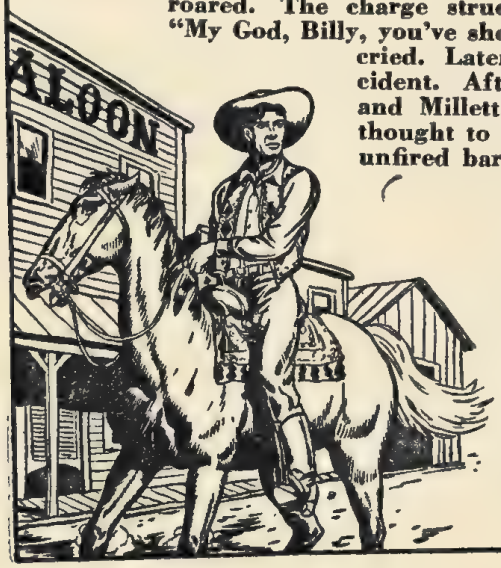
COLT KINGS OF THE FIGHTING WEST

BY FOWLER AND CASE

ON Aug. 15, 1873, after making a circuit of Ellsworth bars, Billy Thompson hit Brennan's saloon, where his famous brother, Ben, was watching a monte game in which Cad Pierce, a cattleman, was betting heavily. Neil Cain dropped from the game and a gambler, John Sterling, took his place, telling the Thompsons, according to their later version, "If I win, consider yourselves half in." Sterling won a thousand dollars, then walked from the room, pocketing the full amount. Word that Billy and his brother were on the warpath flew about town, and Sheriff Whitney canceled an excursion engagement. He would have been wise to have kept it.

THE explosion came that afternoon in Nick Lentz's saloon, where Ben ran into Sterling and demanded, "Where's our half?" Abruptly, Sterling slapped Thompson across the face. A man named Jack Marco drew and covered Thompson. Ben, unarmed, returned to Brennan's, where Billy Thompson was with Pierce, Cain and other Texan friends. Suddenly Sterling and Marco appeared in front of the saloon, yelling, "Git yore guns, you damned Texans, and come out and fight!" Billy and Ben ran to Jake New's saloon, for their weapons. Billy snatched up a double-barreled shotgun, Ben a six-shooter and a Winchester rifle. Billy cocked both shotgun barrels. As he stepped from the saloon, one barrel discharged accidentally, almost killing two passersby, Major Seth Mabry and Captain Eugene Millett. The two gentlemen jumped for the nearest doorway.

ACROSS the street walked the brothers, hurling challenges to Sterling and Marco. Sheriff Whitney came down the street. Whitney, Billy's friend, persuaded the brothers to return to Brennan's with him. They had almost reached the saloon when W. A. Langford let out a yell. "Look out, Billy! Here they come!" Into Beebee's store leaped the Thompsons, followed by Whitney. Marco appeared suddenly on the street. Ben fired and missed. Billy's shotgun roared. The charge struck Whitney in the side. "My God, Billy, you've shot your best friend!" Ben cried. Later, Billy claimed it an accident. After almost killing Mabry and Millett, he had, he said, never thought to lower the hammer on the unfired barrel. Whitney died.



LATER, Billy left Brennan's by a rear exit and mounted a horse brought by Cain. Billy's other friend, Pierce, handed him a roll of bills. Then, according to later newspaper accounts, Bill rode unhurriedly out of town, cursing and inviting a fight. A posse pursued Billy, hoping it would not catch him. It didn't. But three years later Billy's past caught him. He was arrested by Texas Rangers and returned to Ellsworth. He was tried on a charge of murdering Whitney. "I'm sorry it had to happen," he explained. "It was an accident." The jury piously agreed with Billy—and acquitted him!

BOSS OF THE

By

Tom W. Blackburn

Boss Jim Bennett got a quick ride on John Barleycorn's toboggan, there in roaring Golconda Bar, and wound up his string in a pauper's gravel pit, a broken, forgotten bottle bum. Then he got one last chance to be once again king of the hard-rock men: To fight—to kill—to win his share of glory. . . . But the trick was that he had to do it—hiding behind the skirts of the nerviest, prettiest girl to ever hold down the risky throne of Queen of the Honkytonks!

HARD-ROCK REBELS

CHAPTER ONE

Bottle Bum

AT HALF past three in the afternoon the heat and humidity had increased to a point of intolerance. The air lay like a wet blanket across the brushy foothills, its suspended moisture so diffusing sunlight in passage that a high, glaring haze obscured the granite serrations of the Big Sierra, on beyond the canyon of the Stanislaus. And like a wet blanket, the heavy air was a cloying, drenching drag on movement. Bennett shoved the bit of his square-nose shovel into the gravel with the arch of his foot and leaned heavily on the handle.

"The hell with it!" he said hoarsely.

The man beside him, a squat, wrinkled Irishman with immense shoulders and a sloppy pot, paused momentarily.

"You got to eat, rain or shine," he said. "Where's your gut, boy?"

"The hell with it!" Bennett said again, and slapped at the shovel handle, knocking it over on the gravel. The Indian on the hand barrow, seeing Bennett was done with shoveling, trundled his partial load off down the plank toward the long tom in the center

Bennett fired again as the second man touched the butt of his weapon

of the pit. Abel Crane was overseeing at the separator. He noted the partial load on the Indian's barrow and glanced quickly out over the score of men laboring in the pit. Seeing Bennett's idle shovel, Crane came up the catwalk with a long, angry stride.

"Slug him first, boy," the Irishman beside Bennett said. "You won't have a chance for two swings."

Crane was a big man, swollen with sudden prosperity, arrogance and his own importance.

"Get on that shovel!" he snapped at Bennett. "This shift don't end till sundown."

Bennett closed his hands. His tongue was crusted with a gummy yellow taste. His navel seemed connected to his spine with a raw nerve fiber, so that each movement tended to double him up with a stab of pain. Heat hammered his skull, inside and out, dulling thought. He was sick, done in. He knew but one antidote. He needed a drink.

"The hell with it!" he said for the third time.

"When I give an order in this pit, it goes!" Crane growled. "A man's lucky to get in here. When he does, he works his shift, by hell! Get on that shovel."

Bennett shook his head. If somebody picked the shovel up and put it in his hand, he couldn't lift another scoop of gravel. He didn't need work; he needed whiskey. He tried to grin at Crane.

"Get on it, yourself," he invited.

The pit turned upside down and landed on him. Gravel was in his ears and mouth. He rose painfully to his hands and knees, shaking his head back and forth slowly while nausea knotted his belly and something else inside of him writhed. Jim Bennett down, knocked down, again. How many times in the last ten days? Too many to remember. Jim Bennett . . . who said the road to hell was paved?

Abel Crane turned away, chaffing at reddened knuckles. He raised his voice. "Ben, come over here with that cash belt. Got another yellow-belly that don't want to trade a little sweat for a chance to get his feet under him. A damned bottle bum. Pay him off. Gravel ran forty-four cents a yard yesterday. Call it eleven cents for him. Figure he's loaded five yards since noon—and that's giving him the edge. Half a dollar, Ben."

Crane moved back toward the long tom. The Irishman beside Bennett offered him a hand. He refused it and climbed to his feet. A man with a black hat over a red face and a canvas money belt across the bulge of a sweat-streaked blue shirt came up and held out half a dollar, silver. Bennett took the coin clumsily. It slipped from his fingers. The Irishman bent and retrieved it for him. The man with the money belt walked away.

"You should have stuck it out till sundown, boy," the Irishman said. "You'd have had enough for a meal, a drink, and a turn around a dance floor with a gal, then. Wouldn't none of 'em hurt you."

"A gal?" Bennett repeated.

The Irishman grinned. "Columbia's for sure the richest square mile on earth, now," he agreed. "Two wagonloads of gals come in from Sacramento today. The hell with this being God's country. When it get's to be a woman's country, that's for me!"

Bennett rubbed the bruise Crane's fist had left along his jaw and he looked at the squat little Irishman.

"Friend," he said bitterly, "to hell with them, too!"

Turning, he climbed the sandy, sloping edge of the pit. At surface level he glanced at the dust streaking his pants but did not brush at it. A fence rimmed the pit. He swung his legs over this and turned to look at the sign nailed to it:

THE PAUPER'S PIT
FREE WORK AND A QUARTER-SHARE OF GRAVEL DUG.
APPLY TO A. CRANE, PROP.

Bennett spat at the sign and started across tumbled piles of worked gravel toward the fresh red brick walls of Columbia's business block. He was aware that he reeled a little as he walked. The hell with that, too. What he needed was a drink. Half a dollar would buy it.

BENNETT had his eye on the Poker Dot, an unlovely, brass-and-beer creekman's saloon where he had spent the last of his money an arrival in Columbia the night before. But the street took to undulating under him and he hauled up to steady himself against one of the pillars supporting a

wide awning, half way up the block. Almost immediately a rough hand seized his shoulder and pulled him around. A man in a surprisingly clean white shirt and a stiff white bar apron belonged to the hand.

"Keeping moving," the man ordered briskly. "No loitering in front of the Congress."

Bennett saw that the awning whose shade had arrested him was across the front of a two-story brick building which was Columbia's most impressive bid for permanence. He saw, also, that the two wagonloads of doxies the Irishman next to him in Crane's pit had boasted were in town seemed to have taken refuge from the heat in a long row of chairs under the awning. Ruffles, rouge and silk. Better revenue producers than any claim in these burned hills so long as men had dust to spend and women were scarce in the Sierra. The man in the apron tighted his grip on Bennett's shoulder.

"Get moving!" he growled, his shoulders bunched to shove hard but before he could do so the occupant of the end chair in the row under the awning rose swiftly.

"No! Wait!" The man in the bartender's apron dropped his hand in surprise. The girl crossed the walk. "He's sick. Leave him alone!"

Bennett frowned. He gathered a confused impression from her face. A young face, a trifle square but beautifully molded. There was a freshness and color to the texture of her features wholly different from that of her companions—either those in the other chairs or hundreds of a like kind Bennett had seen in St. Joseph, Laramie, Sacramento or a dozen Sierra camps before this. Almost an air of primness—momentarily he thought he had been wrong in guessing she had come into Columbia in a wagon with the rest. Then he saw under the freshness a grimness, a harsh defiance chiefly evident in her eyes, which warned him she knew every spot on the dice.

"I'd admire to have this bucko toss me out onto the street," Bennett told her. "I'd like to come back tomorrow and see if he can do it again."

"You're sick," the girl repeated. "You need rest." Bennett rammed a hand into his pocket and turned out the empty lining.

"Better learn to know where the dust is before you go prospecting, honey," he said harshly.

The girl's face whitened. She glanced at the man in the apron.

"It looks like I've made a mistake," she said quietly. Turning, she stepped back to her chair. The man in the apron caught Bennett again by the shoulder, spun him with professional skill and drove him sprawling into the dust with an impersonal kick. Some of the girls under the awning laughed. Two miners on the other walk glanced across, but with insufficient interest to break their stride. Bennett unsteadily regained his feet. Something inside of him was dead, all right. Or he was sicker than he thought. This didn't hurt anything in him at all. Maybe tomorrow, but not now. He looked at the building above the awning. There was a sign on it, too.

CRANE'S CONGRESS HOTEL
LODGINGS DELUXE

The hotel bartender was still on the walk. Bennett eyed him. "I'll be back, John," he told the man with an attempt at malice. Turning, he started on down the street.

James E. Sorrels*

has switched to Calvert because Calvert makes a lighter highball.

*of 1015 S. Rosemont, Dallas, Texas

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City

His vision was fuzzing up. His belly refused to quiet down. He passed the block-long congestion of shacks where Chinatown fronted the street. He passed the Poker Dot without seeing it. He passed the smith's shop which was the last building on the street and he climbed a stretch of gravel to a patch or dry, rusty grass under the shade of a small scrub oak. He flung himself down under this partial shelter from the sun's heat and closed his eyes. There were ants on the bark of the scrub oak and there were flies which bit through to blood. Bennett was oblivious to both, devoting the last shred of consiousness to an effort to worm deeper into the anaesthesia of exhaustion settling over him.

CHAPTER TWO

Chinatown Angel

A MAN inevitably associated one thing with another. There was crisp linen which smelled of soap and starch under Bennett. There was a faint aura of perfume in the air about him. And the encrustment of travel and carelessness was gone from him, so that a clean smell rose from his own body. He opened his eyes. It was a small room, a slant-roofed lean-to, but there were curtains at the window.

He sat up. "Laura," he said involuntarily. "Laura?"

With the sound of his own voice he was awake and the association of ideas was shattered. This was Columbia, queen of the southern camps. The richest square mile on earth, every inch of it claimed by the devil. The focus of Sierra drifters and a place where a man could lose himself completely. Laura was on the claim. Laura was in Golconda Bar. She would stay there. Laura was far enough away.

A portiere in the far wall parted. The wooden beads on its fringe clicked softly. The girl from under the awning in front of the Congress Hotel came into the room. Morning freshness was about her.

She smiled. "Feel better?"

Bennett eased back onto his pillow. He had not thought about how he felt. He did so, now. This was Columbia. This was tomorrow. Yesterday afternoon he had turned toes up. He had collapsed under a scrub oak somewhere below town. This was tomorrow and he was in a clean bed. But he didn't feel better. And he wanted nothing to do with a woman.

"No," he said.

"Nothing's the matter with you that some sense won't cure," the girl said briskly. "Nobody can live on whiskey. You've got a hangover and an empty stomach. That's all. Quit feeling sorry for yourself."

"And let you do it for me, maybe? What is this? And don't try the angel business on me. The wings wouldn't fit."

"I've been called everything else in California," the girl said with a sudden hardening of her lips. "but not an angel. And I should feel sorry for you? Thanks, no. I'll save the tears for myself. Turn out. Breakfast is ready."

The girl stepped back through the curtains. Bennett swung his feet to the floor and began pulling his clothes from the back of a chair. Matter of fact, he did feel a little better. Shaky, but better. A drink would set him up. And he was going to get a laugh out of this. This kid with the knowing eyes had him figured for somebody else. It was pretty easy to make that kind of a mistake on the creeks. Men looked pretty much alike in the diggings. Acted pretty much alike, too—from a woman's standpoint—he supposed. So this kid had made a mistake and didn't know it.

She was pretty sure about it and pretty determined. Interceding with the barkeep at the hotel for him. Locating him in the brush below town. Bringing him here, having him brought here. And now feeding him. Bennett hated sure and determined women. He was going to enjoy kicking down this little card house—after he had found out why it had been put up.

Dressed, his face sloshed in a basin on a stand in the corner, but unshaven and his hair tidied only by a couple of careless rakes with his fingers, he stepped into the outer room. A neat table was set in front of a street window. Bennett glanced out as he sat down and saw that this was one of the shanties which fronted Columbia's main street in the block devoted to Chinatown. This kid kept her matches dry, for a fact. Renting anything from one of the clannish Chinese in any of the Sierra camps was a second-class miracle. And evidence of another was on the plate before him. The usual bowl of mush fried up out of local cornmeal, all right, but on top of it an egg—

at a usual asking price of eighteen dollars up a dozen. Realization of hunger started a sudden flow of saliva in Bennett's mouth. He lifted his fork.

"I know Mr. James Bennett," the girl across the table said quietly. "But you don't know me. Since we're going to live in the same house, you ought to. My name is Ruth Conant. And don't tell me you never saw me before in your life because you did—the same night I first saw you."

Bennett put his fork down again. It clattered on the table. This was too thick for him, too fast. This kid wasn't making a mistake, after all. At least, she didn't seem to think she was. Bennett thought his head was going to start hammering again.

"So now we're old friends," he said a little desperately. "One friend to another, would you mind telling me what this is?"

"It'll wait," Ruth Conant said practically. "Eat. That soft-boiled nugget I treated you to is getting cold and you need it." She chased a fragment of mush patty around with her fork. "Laura," she murmured after a moment. "Hm. . . I heard about Jim Bennett sledding out of Golconda Bar on his chin, but I didn't hear about any Laura. Maybe I should have—"

Bennett spoke with his mouth full. "I don't know any nice words."

"She broke you?"

"In nine weeks of the fastest whirl California's seen yet! Then married the man I sold my claim to while I turned out my pockets paying off my debts. Very beautiful, very quick on her feet. I'm a burned boy, honey. I'll owe you for breakfast. I'll say thanks for the rescue yesterday. But—"

"The name is Ruth," the girl across the table cut in quietly. "Not honey. Not Laura. And I need a man with the romance cured out of him for sure. I need a business partner who'll stick to business and nothing else."

"Business?" Bennett repeated warily. "What kind?"

"Odds and ends," Ruth Conant answered easily. "I'm going to take over this camp and I need a man's help. A certain kind of man. Your kind, I think."

"What I would like," Bennett said with conviction, "is a pot of black coffee and the stoutest Mexican cigarette in Columbia. Then I would like to hear you say it again just to see if it sounds the same to me."

BENNETT listened carefully to Ruth Conant's plan. With the exception of scattered Wells Fargo offices, there were few banks in the Sierra. And private banking of a kind, the creation of indebtedness, a sort of shrewd grub-staking, was the surest way to control of anything on the creeks. Bennett was painfully aware of this. Debts incurred in living as Laura thought a new bonanza king should live—in courting as Laura thought the intended of a new bonanza king should be courted, had cost Jim Bennett the richest claim in Golconda Bar.

Here in Columbia Abel Crane's hotel was another example of the same operation—an indication he was a man rich enough to be approached for a loan by any gravel-rooter who might run short of whiskey money, or spending money, or just plain cash. Bennett understood Crane also owned the biggest store in Columbia, where unpaid accounts could be levied in time against the claims of those who had run them up. But Crane's sharpest move had been the two wagonloads of girls. If they were on their toes, and Crane could keep them in line, they'd put him next to the title to a lot of gravel in short order. They were the premium merchandise of the Sierra. Bennett thought Crane already had Columbia in the palm of his hand. He thought the girl across the table from him was crazy. He said so. Ruth Conant blandly disagreed.

"You take your women too seriously, Jim Bennett," she said. "Nobody else in the Sierra does—yet. I know. The men from the creeks figure every unmarried woman they see is like those under the awning at the Congress. You made the same mistake when you saw me, and you're not sure, yet. . . ."

"No, I'm not," Bennett agreed. "I've seen women that aimed to take over a man, or a party, or a poke of dust, but not a whole damned camp—and the smokiest one in the Sierra, at that!"

"I started in New Orleans," Ruth said slowly. "In the theater. Flowers sent to my dressing room. Half-eagles falling on the stage like rain at curtain-call. Midnight suppers in resturants with clean linen on the tables. And men who were gentlemen. Courtesy, Jim Bennett. Compliments which

made being a woman something wonderful. Success. Something like the kind of living you had for the nine weeks you were king of Golconda Bar. Maybe as false. I don't know. But I wanted money, too. A lot of California companies were organizing in New Orleans. I joined a troupe. To Vera Cruz, across Mexico, and up the coast to the Golden Gate on a hide ship. . ." The girl made a wry face.

"Then Sacramento and the diggings," she went on. "Niggardly houses, drunken audiences too impatient for entertainment, wanting only to look at me, to touch me if they could. Men, in a man's country. I had been an artist in New Orleans. In the Sierra I was only a woman. And being a woman is not wonderful, here. I've stood it as long as I can. Now I'm going to have respect—the only kind creek men know—respect for the whip hand!"

"And you want me for a whip?"

"To begin with," the girl agreed. "My last engagement was in Golconda Bar. You were in the audience that night. That's where I saw you and you saw me. I heard how you'd hammered that camp into orderliness before you hit the skids. I tried to find you there, but I was told you had headed for Columbia. You can put teeth in my plan and I can offer you something more than two dollars a day in the Pauper's Pit."

"You can't do it," Bennett said flatly. "You won't even get started. This is Crane's camp—or will be before you can turn around."

Ruth Conant smiled. "I've already started," she corrected quietly. "There are always gentlemen among the Chinese, even in the worst camps. I've gotten this house, other things I need, and they're backing me in something that will draw more gold than Mr. Crane's two wagonloads of petticoats, if I know men—and I think I do."

Bennett shook his head stubbornly.

"Gambling, Mr. Bennett," the girl went on. "Chance. Lady Luck. Hope of something for nothing. That's what brought the gravel hogs into the hills in the first place. Crane's girls won't starve, but the big trade will come to me."

"Hasn't Crane got a casino in the Congress? And there are back rooms in all the saloons."

"All of them side issues. Gambling will come first at my place. Then a bar and maybe a cook. Chinese are outcasts in any camp, but their lotteries have got a reputation for a good thing. The Chinese here have agreed to cut me in on their lotteries. They've built a new joss house across the block. I get the old one, just behind the house, here. It's big enough. And they've found me wheels, tables, cages—everything else—down at Goodyear's. It's on the way up by wagon, now."

Bennett stared at his companion. He recalled, now, the show at Golconda to which she referred. *"A Company of Thespians of Note in Renditions of excerpts from the Great Bard and other Choices of the Theatre Moderne."* He recalled Ruth Conant on the stage that night, demure and frilled, singing a sticky little song about a bad boy in a garden where holihocks grew. Now she was across a table from him, minus demureness and frills and sticky little songs, blandly suggesting he occupy the same house with her. Not the big bed with the fresh linen in the other room. He knew better than that. A cot on the back porch, if there was one, more likely. Now she was calmly admitting she had made good friends among the clannish Chinese—such good friends that she could, with their help, unquestionably make Abel Crane and maybe a few others in Columbia sweat uncomfortably. From a hollyhock garden to the most turbulent camp in the Sierra—because she felt California was a little short on gentlemen!

Bennett laughed and stood up. "You don't need me, honey!" he said.

Ruth Conant rose also. "But I do, for a while, at least. Somebody who has a score of his own to win back from the camps. A man big enough to warn other men away. A pair of fists, maybe a gun. A partner, Jim. It'll take Columbia a little while to get used to my kind of a woman."

"Honey," Bennett said honestly, "I feel sorry for Columbia. What's my first chore?"

"Rustle yourself a bed. Set it up over in that corner, back of the door. Then see Abel Crane. Tell him what we intend to do. Make him understand he's got a fight on his hands."

"Why the warning?"

"Because I'm going to do this with the rules off, and when I'm done I don't want

a man squalling that a woman took unfair advantage of him!"

BY THE time Ruth had produced Papa Lee and Papa Lee had produced both a tolerable bed with springs for Bennett and three Chinese carpenters to handle the conversion of the old joss house into a casino, Jim had begun to realize he might conceivably have business to do with Abel Crane, at that. He button-holed the old Chinaman as they were leaving the empty joss house.

"This is costing you money and it won't make you friends, Lee," he said. "Your people don't have many claims on Columbia gravel. They mostly hire out for labor. Why not stick to that? Why make trouble; why back this girl?"

"Are sticking to picks and shovels," Papa Lee said placidly, "but getting plenty trouble, already. Chinese needing help. Day pay plenty small, now, but we hear talk pretty soon it will be smaller on the big claims. Something needing to be done. This girl says she can do it. She plenty strong here." The old Chinese tapped his head. "We take a chance. We see."

"This camp is on top of the richest gravel in the Sierra," Bennett protested. "And nobody can live on a coollie wage, now. Who's talking of cutting pay?"

"Mist' Crane," Papa Lee said. "Very bad man. Very hungry. Very greedy."

"You sure it's Crane?"

Papa Lee shrugged. "You getting dog. Want dog to be your dog. Jump when you say; lie down when you say; come when you whistle. Wanting so, you beat dog so he know master. Cut pay is first stick. Pretty soon Mist' Crane beat Columbia like hell!"

"Um. . ." Bennett said thoughtfully. "You're going by the house, Lee. You tell Miss Conant I've dropped by to see Crane. I think I better tell him some dogs have got teeth. Maybe he don't know."

Papa Lee flashed a rare smile and padded obligingly away. Bennett swung purposefully up the street. Passing the Congress Hotel, he heard Crane's heavy voice inside. He stepped into the hotel. It was strictly a creek-camp structure. There was no lobby, as such. Instead, the whole forward portion of the ground floor was a single large combination room. A registry desk occupied the slanted space under stairs rising to the second floor. On the opposite wall, running from front to back was a really elegant bar, the surface of which as well as the panels between the mirrors of the backbar was brass-bound marble slabs, polished to a fine surface.

For fifteen feet out from the bar, a strip of hardwood flooring which looked like maple had been let into the unmilled pine which floored the rest of the room. For dancing, Bennett supposed. Out farther into the room was a double row of wire-legged tables, also running from front to back. A dozen of these toward the rear near a door obviously leading to a kitchen, had linen covers and formed the dining facilities of the Congress. The tables near the street entrance were plainly for service from the bar.

Another door near the foot of the bar stood open. Through this Bennett saw the green felt cover of a poker table and he presumed this was the Congress casino. A few bucket-backed, wire-braced wooden chairs were clustered about the foot of the stairs. Together with the chairs under the awning outside, these constituted the lobby comforts of the Congress.

Bennett saw that one of the girls of the two wagonloads Crane had imported was behind the bar, helping the barkeep who had bounced him off of the walk the day before. Two more were in skimpy uniforms, tending early mid-day trade at the dining tables. Half a dozen others were lounging in the chairs at the foot of the stairs. They eyed him with sharpening interest as he came in the door. The barmaid and the waitresses struck Bennett as very funny. He wondered how the ladies themselves liked rotating at such jobs. Crane was apparently determined to get maximum service from his importations.

Crane, himself, was at the foot of the bar, talking to a pair of men in the cleanest clothes Bennett had seen in the camp. Men who had not been out on the gravel. Maybe men who would never go onto the gravel. Both wore guns in tailored, open-top holsters. Impractical gear for men who worked with anything but guns. The squat little Irishman who had been next to him in Crane's pit the day before was also against the bar, midway down. He turned and nodded a friendly greeting as Bennett started across the narrow hardwood floor

toward Crane. The barkeep looked up, saw Bennett and started for his gate.

"I thought I tossed you out of here, yesterday!" he growled. Bennett halted and grinned as the man kicked his gate open, ducked under the bar top and straightened on the outside.

"You did," he agreed pleasantly. "The question is, friend, can you do it again today?"

CHAPTER THREE

Recruit From the Brush

CRANE broke off talking and turned with his two companions to watch. The barkeep advanced confidently. Bennett supposed he still looked like good game. He doubted if he had much color yet and he thought he might still be a little unsteady. But a night's sleep in comfort and Ruth Conant's breakfast had made him feel better. Much better. That was important. Now was as good a time as any other to start erecting a legend about himself. He was going to need it if he was to handle all that Ruth Conant expected of him. He didn't seem to shift his feet, but he hit the barkeep solidly while the man thought he was still a yard out of range. The blow made a pleasantly brisk sound. The barkeep struck the hardwood floor on his shoulders and rolled limply against the foot rail of the bar. Bennett tucked in the tail of his shirt, pulled out a little by the suddenness of his forward step and swing. He smiled a little at Crane.

"Never give the other boy the first lick," he said. "That's my motto. I want to see you, Mr. Crane."

Crane's eyes narrowed. "Weren't you in the pit, yesterday—drunk?"

"Very drunk," Bennett agreed.

Crane turned to his two companions.

"He was paid off. He's got nothing to make trouble over, but he's hunting it. Get rid of him, boys."

The pair beside Crane moved forward. One unhung his gun easily and rocked it suggestively. "Right back on your tracks, John," he invited unpleasantly.

A sharp *click* came from Bennett's left. He glanced in that direction. The little Irishman had turned at the bar and produced an enormous pistol from his shirt front. It was at full cock and level, covering Crane and the pair advancing on Bennett.

"The boy said he had business with you," he said levelly. "Better listen to him, Crane."

"You're pushing on the wrong vest, both of you," Crane said.

The little Irishman looked deceptively friendly behind his big gun. "Want your chin pushed then?" he inquired. "Let the boy have his say."

Crane glanced sullenly at Bennett.

"My name is Bennett, Jim Bennett, of Golconda," Jim said. "A piece of advice to you, Crane. Clean this place up and keep it clean. And watch your step, out on the gravel. You've got competition coming up. This is a fair warning to keep in your own tracks."

"Competition?" Crane said. He grinned slightly. "It's been tried before—and not by a drunk out of my pit, either!"

"Sometimes I'm sober, Crane," Bennett said drily. He glanced at the girls in the chairs clustered near the foot of the stairway. "I've got a skirt for a partner, too. I didn't go it as strong as you, Crane. Just one skirt. Quite a little lady. We're opening a casino in the old joss house in Chinatown and we're going to try for your hair. Don't make us play dirty."

"So you're not drunk," Crane snapped. "Just plain crazy. You won't get any trade. Not in Chinatown. Not in Columbia."

"No trade, when we've ticket sale rights on the local Chinese lotteries?" Bennett smiled. "Those tickets will draw better than free whiskey and you know it. If you want to set the right kind of a price on the hotel, here, and your store and the claims you've grabbed title to, we might buy you out, now. I like to see a man have a chance to keep from losing his shirt."

"So do I," Crane said shortly, "so I'll give you yours, Bennett. Get your woman and get out of this camp—tonight!"

Crane nodded at his two companions, wheeled, and strode into the Congress casino, kicking the door shut behind the three of them. The little Irishman, his huge pistol still in his hand, bent to inspect the groggy, rousing barkeep on the floor, then moved toward the street door of the hotel. Bennett followed him.

The Irishman was waiting on the walk outside. "If it's thanks that's on your mind,

Jim Bennett," he grinned, "you can give 'em to Mike Delaney."

"You've got them, Delaney," Bennett said. "I never was any happier to see a handful of iron." Delaney tossed the heavy weapon fondly and thrust it back into his shirt front.

"She's a handy piece for looks, right enough," he agreed, "but she'd be better if I could keep her charged. Powder's too dear for a poor man and her bore's so tarnation big I have the devil's own time getting molded lead for her."

"That gun is empty?" Bennett asked incredulously.

"As my pockets," Delaney admitted.

"Mike Delaney, I owe you a drink!" Bennett laughed.

"You could do better by me," Delaney said plaintively. "You got your belly full of Crane's pit. So have I. And we both know you and your lady friend ain't opening nothing in this camp without a tangle with Abel Crane any more than anybody else could. Four eyes peeled is better'n two and six is better'n four. Then, if you was to find some pig lead and some powder for my belly-warmer, she might be handy to keep about, too. I'll take fighting to sweating in the sun, any day, and if the pay was a mite better at the first than the last . . ." Delaney shrugged. ". . . why I reckon you could easy hire you a fighting man, Jim Bennett."

"I'm sold," Bennett said. "Come on. We'll go see the boss."

THE CASINO equipment Papa Lee's people had bought for Ruth Conant out of an abandoned saloon above Goodyear's did not arrive by wagon in Columbia as scheduled. It came instead in parcels hidden under the loads of a number of the creaky little hand-carts which the Chinese had brought into the Sierra. Bennett didn't know if Ruth had ordered this change in delivery or whether the shrewdness of Papa Lee's representatives was responsible. Bennett didn't know which carts brought in the equipment when it began to arrive; it was certain that Abel Crane couldn't know, either. The cages, the wheels and the tables were carried one at a time into the remodeled joss house and set aside until Bennett and Mike Delaney had time to assemble them.

The little Irishman proved as handy with an adze and square and drawknife as he had with his huge pistol. He had something more valuable than raw courage, in Bennett's estimation—a completely phlegmatic acceptance of any situation and a wholly unhurried assessment of it, so that he could neither be bluffed nor stampeded. Bennett's first intimation of the slenderness of the finances with which Ruth Conant was working was her flat refusal to hire Delaney in spite of his urging she do so.

Mike accepted her refusal with shrewd insight. "Trouble is, brash as she is, no doubt, the colleen lacks enough fingers and toes for all she's trying to do at once," he told Jim. "She's a sight more scared than she'll admit. We'll let her get used to me, gradual-like. I'll keep on bunking in the brush, like I been doing, but I'll be around when there's a chore. When I've earned me keep and she's got the dust to spend, I'll get my pay."

Delaney had been at work in the joss house the next day when Bennett and the girl came out from breakfast. Ruth said nothing when she saw him. Two days later she was giving Mike orders and scorching him if he didn't move fast enough to suit her. Bennett's estimate of Delaney's knowledge of women increased considerably.

Mike painted and hung a sign in front of Ruth's house over the walk leading back to the new casino . . . THE ORIENTAL. Two dealers and a croupier came down from Hangtown, hearing a new door was opening in Columbia, and were promptly hired. Papa Lee found beds for them as he did for Delaney in the crowded quarters of Chinatown. Two men were found within a week in the brush behind the block-square congestion of Chinese shanties, both dead of a singularly small knife wound under the left shoulder blade, but both were strangers and their deaths meant nothing, creating no eddy in the turbulence of Columbia. If they were Crane men, the owner of the Congress made no more overt move than sending them in. If they had carried firing oil or powder and were attempting to prowl the new casino, the nameless Chinese whose knives had found them said nothing.

The gambling room at the Congress and the girls Crane had imported kept lights high at the hotel and the night boisterously alive. There was idle speculation over the im-

pending opening of the Oriental, but more hard-luck gravel-rooters were pouring into Crane's Pauper's Pit every day and more accounts were being run up in his store. More miners with bread to butter were crowding about the man, currying his favor. His shadow was spreading constantly wider over the richest square mile on earth.

Bennett's first amused enthusiasm over his partner's plans faded and he began to wonder if he was any better off here than he had been in Golconda Bar. A woman could take over a man, but a woman couldn't take over the country—not this piece of it—not when a man like Abel Crane had all the reins. The afternoon of the day the Oriental was to open, he tried to persuade Ruth Conant to give it up, to take Crane's advice and quit the camp.

Ruth Conant laughed at him. "How a man ever wins anything in a gamble, I'll never know, Jim," she said. "They bluff, they build their hands, but they try to play their opponent's cards, too. And it won't work. The pendulum has started to swing our way. Come on in the house and I'll prove it. Papa Lee just sent word I've got a caller."

BENNETT followed her into the house. A thin, harsh-faced man in creek clothes was hunched forward on one of the straight-backed chairs. He rose impatiently as they entered and cast a hostile glance at Bennett.

"My partner, James Bennett," Ruth Conant said briefly. "You wanted to see me—on business, I think."

The thin man was not at ease. "I don't know, Miss Conant," he said. "I was told you could extend a little credit on mining properties."

"Local ones," Ruth agreed briskly. "How much do you need?"

"Well, first I'll have to ask you and Mr. Bennett to keep this to yourselves. My name is Andrew Moultrie. I own the Seventy-Seven claim. Been trying to get water over to it for some large scale work, but it costs money. A lot of it. Two months ago I got a loan from Abel Crane. Now I'm out of cash again and I need more."

"But you're afraid to ask Mr. Crane for fear he'll figure your claim a bad risk for what he's already put in it and foreclose on you," Ruth said. "You're hoping I'll help you out by taking a second lien."

Moultrie looked relieved. "Yes. I've even thought a time or two that Crane might be behind the vandalism that's been holding my flume up, but I can't prove anything and he's too big in Columbia to talk careless about. His loan was four thousand. I can't ask that much from you on a second lien. Eighteen hundred would squeeze me by."

"Give yourself some slack, Mr. Moultrie," Ruth suggested. "What's your claim worth—just between us?"

"Ten thousand to any man in camp, as is," Moultrie said proudly. "A fortune when development's done."

Ruth nodded. "I'll let you have twenty-five hundred," she said.

Moultrie was effusive with thanks. The girl swiftly wrote out the loan agreement. Moultrie signed it. Ruth thrust it into an envelope and handed it to Bennett.

"The Wells Fargo office does the camp recording," she said. "See this is put in their safe. Then get twenty-five hundred dollars in cash from our—ah—vault."

Bennett blinked, but he understood. Leaving the Wells Fargo office, he located Papa Lee. The old Chinese was troubled by his demand, but he opened a lacquered chest and counted out twenty-five hundred dollars in currency and coin. He motioned for Bennett to look in the chest before he closed it again. Only a few coins remained on the bottom.

"You tell her," Papa Lee said. "Empty. No more. No more. The casino, the equipment from Goodyear's, and now this. The money is gone. Plenty sorry, but no more. Comes time now for help for the Chinese. You ask her that."

Returning to the house, Bennett surrendered the pouch of money to Andrew Moultrie. When the man was gone, Ruth Conant looked triumphantly at Bennett.

Jim scowled at her. "That was the last in Papa Lee's chest," he told her. "The last money in Chinatown. What are the Chinese going to get out of it?"

"Enough," Ruth Conant said. "Their wants are pretty simple, Jim. And they're Oriental. They were born patient. They can wait for a while."

"Honey, you're a crazy woman," Bennett said. "Wall-eyed and broom-tailed. You're opening your casino tonight with

nothing left in your kick to smooth the bumps if there's trouble."

"There won't be any bumps, there won't be any trouble, if my partner does his share of earning his salt. You're going to keep the casino running quietly. Meantime, I've just bought a ten-thousand-dollar claim for sixty-five hundred dollars."

"Bought it—when Crane has got first bite?"

"Bought it," the girl repeated. "I don't doubt Crane has been hiring Moultrie's work held up, trying to break him. He'll keep on till my twenty-five hundred dollars is gone, too. He'll plan to take over Moultrie's claim, then. But before he can do it I'll step in, pay him the four thousand Moultrie owes him and take the claim myself. That's what I've got to have—all the gravel under Columbia that I can get my hands on."

"Then you figured Moultrie didn't have a chance of hanging on when you loaned him that money. You're planning to get him off his claim—not keep him on it!"

"Of course. What kind of money does regular loan interest amount to in a gold camp? I want the big profits."

"But you're broke now and you'll have to pay Crane four thousand mighty soon to make your idea work. You think the casino will produce that kind of money?"

"If you keep it operating, Jim. The dealers have had their instructions and I've promised them a scale of bonuses. Delaney has spent a day and a half mounting the roulette wheels. You ask Mike how much profit he thinks the casino will show."

"Never give a sucker an even break, eh?"

"Never give anybody an even break, Jim. That's the way we operate."

"You've got that a litle wrong, honey," Bennett said quietly. "I was just temporarily on my chin. It isn't a habit. I'll try to keep the smoke fanned out of the casino because I promised you that much. But the rest of this is a game I don't know how to play."

"You better learn," Ruth snapped. "You'll have a camp to help run, shortly."

Bennett shook his head. "Uh-uh. That's for you. The casino—that's as far as I go—and only because I promised you."

"Don't tell me you're sprouting honor. Not in Columbia, not in the Sierra. Don't tell me you're holding up clean hands!"

"Honey," Jim Bennett said slowly, "I don't know what to tell you—yet. I'm going out and buy a drink."

MIKE DELANEY found Bennett at the Poker Dot. The place was doing a tremendous business and Delaney had trouble making himself heard.

"Jim, you got to get out of here. A devil's brew's afoot!" The little Irishman's voice was urgent and relief at having found Bennett was in his eyes.

Bennett nodded wisely at him. "I know," he said. "I've been having some. Worst whiskey in the world. Bartender, a fresh bottle for m'friend—my good friend. . . ."

The bartender slapped a bottle down in front of Delaney. Bennett had trouble pawing out change. Delaney eyed the bottle with longing but resolutely turned away from it.

"Every mother's son on the ridges has come into town tonight, Jim," he went on hurriedly. "It don't mean no good!"

"The hell!" Bennett said loudly. "Ask my beautiful, stubborn, quick-fingered partner. She'll sing a different verse, Mike, my

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boy. This is good. The multitude coming in to crown a new Queen of Columbia. That's what it is. Long live the Oriental!"

Deilaney jogged Bennett's arm warningly, thought better of it and poured himself a prodigious drink from the bottle in front of him. A huge, drunken creek man, reeking of sweat and bad whiskey, tapped Bennett's shoulder.

"You a partner in the Oriental?" he inquired thickly.

"For tonight," Bennett admitted. The creek man shook his head and made a stuttering, clucking noise with his tongue. The tap on Bennet's shoulder became a fumblin gesture of sympathy. With his other hand the miner swept a nearly empty whiskey bottle along the bar.

"That's too bad," he said. "That's plenty too bad. I owe you a drink. Yes, sir, a big drink."

Two or three other creek men close laughed loudly. Delaney poured himself another drink and caught Bennett's arm.

"Jim, we got to get out of here. Half the boys that hit town are stopping by Crane's store. Crane must be handing out dust to them. How they buying all this whiskey, otherwise?"

"Dirty pool," Bennett said severely. "We had better look into this, Mike, my boy. Abel Crane is a very dishonest man."

"At least he's sober," Delaney said sourly, but he picked up the bottle in front of him when they backed away from the bar.

The street was crowded in front of Crane's store. The aisles within were jammed with people trading. Bennett saw the skirts of one or two of Crane's Congress Hotel girls idling in the crowd. But his attention was drawn to the door of a storeroom at the rear, through which a number of miners were passing. Delaney and himself approached this and were carried through with the general press milling there. A clerk in an apron sat behind a hogshead on which were stacked heaps of coins.

"What do you weigh?" the clerk asked without looking up as Bennett reached the barrel.

"One-eighty in the cold air," Bennett said.

The clerk shoved a double-eagle across. "That's close enough. The boss said a dime a pound. We want big men. Pass the word we want big men. And remember—" The clerk's voice rose. "Remember, all of you. It's got to look like a free-for-all when it starts and the place has got to be wrecked. Wrecked, understand?"

Bennett pocketed his double-eagle. Delaney got a wrinkled bill and some loose silver. They filed back out through the store and halted on the walk.

"The Oriental will be toothpicks by midnight," Delaney said. He shivered and sucked on the neck of his bottle. "We're in for a hard night, and the little lady—"

Bennett nodded. "The little lady—Mike, this requires thought, strategy—"

LANTERNS had been lit under the Oriental's sign and a fair crowd was beginning to drift back along the walk leading to Ruth Conant's casino. Mike Delaney flung his empty whiskey bottle into the street. "Miss Conant wanted you as quick as I could find you, Jim," he said.

"We can't handle this off of the cuff, Mike. It's got to be thought over."

"The place is as crooked as a dog's hind leg," Delaney said. "Those wheels will stop when the croupier whistles."

"You got an idea?" Jim asked.

Delaney shook his head.

Bennett gripped his arm. "One will come to us. Inspiration. That's what we need, Mike."

"It don't do for a woman to nurse a grudge," Delaney said. "They work too hard at it. She'll fix the first lottery if the Chinks give her a chance."

"A woman is all Columbia needed," Bennett said. "You told me so, yourself."

Delaney eyed the empty bottle in the street. "What I need is a drink," he growled.

"I told you an idea would come to us," Bennett said with satisfaction. He shouldered down the walk toward the Poker Dot.

There was more room at the bar. Abel Crane's double-eagle produced a pair of bottles in a hurry. Bennett gripped his and stared unseeingly at the label.

Delaney wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "If I wasn't working for you, Jim, I'd have quit afore I touched those wheels."

"You're lying," Bennett said with conviction.

Delaney sighed and nodded. "If she didn't have that grudge she'd be mighty nice to have around," he muttered.

"They'd all be nice to have around if they didn't have a knife to your back!" Bennett said. "It's a good thing justice is blind. One look at Ruth Conant and she'd empty every pocket in Columbia into the little lady's purse!"

"They're going to tear that place down, Jim. After all the worry and trouble she's put into it. After the Chinks sinking everything they've got into backing her. They're going to tear it clean down. And this ain't a quiet camp. Something could happen to her."

Bennett's hands tightened on the bottle in front of him. "Mike, you see a man who doesn't give a damn what happens to the Oriental or to his partner. One plays one game and one another, but a woman in these camps is headed in the same direction all of the time. I got pushed through one knot hole. I don't want it again," he said grimly.

"Who's lying, now?" Delaney asked. "You promised her you'd keep smoke out of the casino. And I know you're going to do it."

"With you to help me," Bennett said, straightening.

"A couple of shillalahs across the biggest heads will do the trick," Delaney said. "And I got my old belt-gun charged. She'll make enough noise to quiet anybody that talks back. We got good odds, Jim. Won't over half of them that took Crane's money be sober enough to make real trouble."

"I wish I was as drunk as you are, Mike Delaney," Bennett said. He turned to the barkeeper. "Got a pistol back there?" he asked.

The man nodded and produced a heavy revolver. Bennett leaned sharply across the bar, caught the man's arm and spun him. Doubling the arm behind the fellow's back, he lifted the weapon from his straining fingers.

"Thanks," he said as he released the startled barkeep. "I'll take it. Mike, there's going to be a lot of smoke. We're going to have to fan like hell."

Delaney threw back his shoulders and grinned. "So what?" he boasted. "I'm a Donegal man, myself."

CHAPTER FOUR

Battle of the Oriental

ALL Columbia seemed to have funneled into the Oriental. The high-trimmed lamps swung from the rafters lighted a restless press of humanity which milled from one table to the next, seeming to concentrate in two locations. One of these was the cashier's cage where a busy counter was converting coin, currency and dust into chips in evidence the games were getting a heavy play. The other was a stable on a slightly raised platform where Ruth Conant was selling tickets to a Chinese lottery. Papa Lee sat behind her, resplendent in a silk tunic and a lacquered hat, beside a wicker tumbler from which the winning numbers would be drawn. Above the table a sign promised a drawing immediately after the sale of the last ticket and Ruth Conant was doing a land-office business.

Bennett saw Abel Crane backed unobtrusively against the wall near the door, a wide grin of anticipation on his face. The two gunhung men who had been with him in the Congress bar were again beside him. The fulminate temper of the crowd was evident to Bennett, a recognizable explosiveness. He saw that a number of the miners were getting boisterous, working themselves into a destructive mood. He knew the fuse had already nearly burned into the charge planted under the Oriental and that those who were too noisy should be weeded out, fast. But he couldn't take his eyes from the girl on the platform across the room.

He realized suddenly that he could have paid little attention to Ruth Conant the night he had seen her on the stage in Golconda Bar. She was dressed again in the frilled, low-cut costume he thought she had worn that night, but there was nothing demure about her, now. She had the rich, tantalizing alive beauty of a clear glass of fine, tawny port—the bite, too, and the intoxication. She was laughing, sometimes mocking, but alive. Bennett could feel the aliveness across the room. He could see that every man who left her table felt that he had gotten more than the lottery ticket in his hand for the money he'd parted with. Bennett continued to stare, thinking he must have had more to drink than he had intended. This was his partner. This was a woman who had shed all of the rules.

This was a woman who was going to take over the noisiest camp in the Sierra—at her own price. He tried to hold this in his mind, but he could retain only a fragment of it. This was a woman—

"Something!" he muttered. "Really something!"

"Sure is!" Delaney said beside him, his rolling eyes taking in all of the room. "Got no room to swing. We got to have room to swing, Jimmy, boy."

Bennett ignored the little Irishman, continuing to stare across the room. Ruth Conant had worked a spell throughout the entire casino. In this instant he doubted if Abel Crane would get any return for the money he had invested in this crowd. He doubted if Crane had a chance. He doubted if any man had a chance. For this moment he was convinced that Ruth Conant would become exactly what she had promised—Queen of Columbia. The Sierra was ripe for a woman.

The moment ended abruptly.

"Got to have room," Delaney muttered again beside him. There was a sharp, chopping, meaty sound. Richly burred with satisfaction, Delaney's voice sounded again. "There, that's better. Which one of you buckos is next?"

Bennett wheeled. Mike was caressing a square length of scantling which he had apparently picked up unnoticed as they came through the yard. Miners at the nearest table were staring in surprise at two of their number who had been stretched flat with one swing. The stares shifted to Delaney's pleased, inviting grin. Abel Crane shouted and the Oriental exploded.

Three miners converged on Bennett at once. He hit one an inch above the ornate buckle on his belt. He sank the heel of his boot into the instep of the second's foot. And he rammed a shoulder under the chin of the third. But the combined impact of the charge of the three jolted him off balance and he went down among them, thrashing in a tangle of boots and legs. Brass-capped toes lashed at him. Somebody with a table leg wrenched loose made half a dozen stabs at him without connecting before he rolled off through the press and escaped. He came to his feet betwen two centers of struggle. Every man in the casino seemed to have gone joyfully crazy, each of them taking a roaring, reckless delight in swinging fists with no regard for targets. A couple of yards away Bennett could hear Mike Delaney raging with pleasure, his voice so far gone into Gaelic brogue that his words were unintelligible.

BENNETT glanced instinctively toward the table where Ruth Conant had been. She had lost color but she had not moved. Behind her, Papa Lee had come to his feet, one hand thrust into the opposite sleeve of his tunic. Bennett thought he saw the glimmer of a slender length of steel there. And those who had been crowding close to the platform to get their chance at the last of the lottery tickets had turned about, tangling with the nearest of the crowd. The platform and the girl were a quiet island in the riot raging through the rest of the Oriental. Ruth Conant seemed in little danger.

Bennett's next thought was of the cashier. This was Crane's game and Crane would hit where it would hurt most—where it would produce a profit for him. Bennett started in the direction of the cage. A ram of knuckles hit him in the mouth. He staggered, glanced against another man, and used his knee on the man with the knuckles. For an instant he could see himself as he actually was—one of two drunks who had come blandly into this place against hopeless odds with the assured conviction that they could and would hand-whip an entire camp of whiskey-stoked miners. He took a glancing blow above one eye and this brief lucidity fled. In its place rose a hot, welcome, singing pleasure. The salt of blood was good in his mouth and he liked the tight feel of his fingers as he curled them into fists. He spread a man's nose like a blot on paper and he heard his own voice rising in a volume and vocabulary which filled him with mildly prideful astonishment.

Accident or a similar idea seemed to be shaping Mike Delaney's course across the casino floor. Bennett saw their angles of approach would converge at the cashier's cage, behind the flimsy wicket of which the frightened counter was hurriedly stuffing loose money into a canvas bag. Delaney was still working his length of scantling enthusiastically and he was rapidly being granted the room to work in which he desired.

Sweat was stinging Bennett's eyes and his forearms and wrists ached with the hammering they had been delivering, but he saw with satisfaction that the destructive joy of the miners was rapidly ebbing and that they were beginning to sidestep him as well as Delaney's shillalah.

"Good whiskey's the making of a man," he told a face which appeared in front of him, emphasing his first and last words with a wide left and right swing to the point of the man's chin. The fellow went down. Beyond him Bennett suddenly saw the two gun-bearing men who had been standing close to Abel Crane. They were near the cashier's wicket. Too near. And along the wall somewhere he heard Crane's voice rise.

"The Irishman! Nail that crazy Mick!"

One of the men flipped his gun clear, lining it swiftly. Bennett had not thought of his own borrowed gun. He tore it from his belt, lunging toward Crane's men.

"Hold it!" he shouted. "Not in this crowd, you fool!"

The man fired. Somewhere in the crowd a man yelped, but Mike Delaney's shillalah continued to flail a path clear. Bennett shouted again.

"Hold it!"

Both of Bennett's men heard him. They pivoted. The one with the smoking gun hooked his thumb over the hammer of the weapon. Bennett's pistol jumped in his hand. The Crane man slammed into his companion, dropped his gun and tried to stay on his feet. His knees buckled, however, and he spilled onto the floor. Bennett fired again as the second man touched the butt of his weapon. The fellow bent forward over a shattered arm.

"Clear out!" Bennett bellowed. "Out—all of you!"

He glimpsed Abel Crane's startled face along the wall and split a siding board a foot above the man's head with a third shot.

"Into the street with you!" Bennett thundered again. "The Oriental runs quiet games or it closes its doors. I'll gut-shoot the first man that shows fight. Out, now!"

The crowd wavered and broke. A miner close at hand was staring stupidly at the gun in Bennett's hand. He belted it, seized the man, turned him, and planted the heel of his shoe in the fellow's backside with a powerful push.

"Show up sober tomorrow or get thrown out!" he howled fiercely, liking the way his voice rang in the now nearly silent casino. "If one of you wants to know who's going to do the throwing, let him step up and I'll show him, now—" He paused an instant then added with satisfaction, "—by hell!"

Delaney, with one eye closed and one cheek sagging open from an enormous knuckle cut but still clinging to his battered length of scantling, appeared beside Bennett. He waved his shillalah. "And be damned if I won't be on the front walk to count the bounces!" he finished with joyous truculence.

The crowd milled and tumbled hurriedly out the door. Delaney turned to Jim and clapped a hand to his shoulder.

"Bennett does for a name, boy," he said with affection, "but I'd bet every busted head in Columbia tonight that your mother was an O'Shaunessey or a Ryan!"

BENNETT began to feel a little empty in the middle. He saw with relief that some of the miners had carried Crane's gun handlers out with them. There was only a small stain on the floor. Papa Lee and Ruth Conant had quit the platform. Ruth stopped in front of Bennett, staring at him and at Mike Delaney with an expressionless face. Papa Lee crossed to close the outer door after the last of the crowd.

He came back and grinned at Bennett. "Very dangerous that does barking when biting all finished," he said approvingly. "Chinese very lucky. They have good friends in Columbia."

"I never saw anything like this in my life," Ruth Conant said slowly. "Those men were wild. They were going to tear the Oriental down. And then the two of you—Jim Bennett, you're crazy!"

"I'm drunk," Bennett said defensively.

"You did that for me—for the Oriental." Ruth had moved closer.

Bennett eyed her warily. Perfume was in his nostrils again. "I said I was drunk."

"And I was afraid you were going to quit me," she went on softly. "I was afraid you thought I was going to hurt this camp—so you half kill every man in it! You and Mike—"

"The boy has got a pair of hands," Delaney agreed cheerfully.

"We've made almost enough tonight to

pay Papa Lee back all he has loaned us," Ruth said, turning toward the cashier's cage.

"There's something besides the loans," Bennett said. "What about getting the day-wages raised? What about breaking up the boundaries of Chinatown so Papa Lee and his people can get out of these shacks? What about fixing it so they can trade in the bars and stores and ride the coaches with anybody else?"

The girl wheeled. "I can't do everything!" she snapped. "I've made the Oriental pay—proved that it will keep right on paying. I can pay back Papa Lee's loans with enough interest to make his time and trouble worth while. But I can't change the kind of animals that hunt gold on the creeks!"

"If you did promise, it wouldn't mean anything," Bennett said grimly. "You can't change yourself, either. And there's worse ways of hunting gold than with a shovel and a pan!"

"Jim, you *are* drunk!" Ruth said quietly.

Bennett swung his head. "Not now," he said. "This camp can do with a boss. Most camps have got to have them. But I'd pick Abel Crane over a woman."

"Crane—over me?" Ruth was incredulous.

Bennett balled up a fist and looked at it. "I could make Crane see sense. I know better than to try with a woman."

"I've tried to make you understand, Jim," the girl said earnestly, dropping her voice and sliding a hand onto Bennett's arm. "I'll give every miner on the creeks the same chance he'd give me if he had the upper hand. But a woman's got just as much right on the Mother Lode—if bad luck lands her there—as any man, and I'm going to prove it. This is just the beginning. Jim, I've not told you all my plans. I—I don't want trouble with you—"

"Then you'd better head back to New Orleans," Bennett said bluntly. "What you'll try to do to this camp shouldn't happen in hell and I'm going to try to keep you from it."

The girl's lips tightened. "I'm not afraid of Crane, Jim, but I am of you," she said. "And when I'm afraid, I use every claw I own."

"Better start honing the points on them, honey; you're going to need them," Bennett answered. He turned and crossed to the door. Delaney followed him.

Outside, Delaney halted. "Boy," he asked aggrievedly, "didn't your mother ever learn you when to kick a gal and when to kiss her?"

BENNETT noted that the lamp burned late in the house in front of the Oriental, but he bunked with Delaney in the lean-to Papa Lee had located for him in Chinatown. They breakfasted with the family who owned the lean-to. In honor of the extra guest, a little of a precious store of rice was steamed. Bennett felt like he had chewed bullets when he left the table. The meal and the grim poverty of the household worked on his nerves like a file. It was wrong that any man who would work should have to exist in this fashion in one of the richest gold camps the world had ever known. An impermanence could not be used as an excuse. Columbia would die when the gravel had all been worked, but there were yet mountains of it untouched, and as Sierra settlements went, Columbia would enjoy a long life. The solid brick of her buildings and the scope of the plans of most operators insured this. He was in bad humor when he quit Chinatown.

"I don't take to crooked games and cards up sleeves, boy," Delaney told him as they moved along the street. "Not any more than I take to Crane and the way he sweats every down-on-his-luck man-jack he can get into that Pauper's Pit of his. That's why I strung with you last night and aim to keep on stringing with you. But I don't figure you a hundred per cent right. There's a heart in that gal, Jim. A Donegal man is born knowin' such things. She's riding a grouch, that's all. I'd take even money she's as square as a good red brick, inside."

"You'd get cheated on that bet, too!" Bennett said sourly.

"I'll stake a bottle of good keg whiskey," Delaney said promptly. "You headin' out to Moultrie's?"

Bennett nodded. "I figured you would," Delaney went on. "There's a sight of men in this camp could do with a good friend. Moultrie's one. You'll find the others, soon enough, if you want to pull somebody else's plow. But I don't like to see you trying to turn a right nice skirt under in your furrow."

"Maybe you'd better stick with Ruth, then—maybe you better keep her out of my way," Bennett suggested.

Delaney shook his head. "It's you that'll need help, boy, not her," he said. "Since last night it'll be you and me that worries Abel Crane—and plenty more than the gal will worry him, too. So if she and Crane are against you, you'll he headin' up-grade whichever way you hike."

"There's one answer," Bennett said shortly. "I drifted in here broke and quiet, not giving a damn. I can get out the same way."

"You don't mean that," Delaney said surely.

"No," Bennett agreed after a moment. "No, I don't. I've had all the bad whiskey I can swallow. I've got to take hold of something."

"Pity it couldn't have been the gal," Delaney murmured stubbornly.

I'll take Crane," Bennett growled shortly. "Come on. Let's find Moultrie and see what's happening to his flume. . . ."

* * *

Bennett had an engineer's eyes, sharpened by practice. Moultrie's Seventy-Seven claim lay on the crown of one of the low, sandy ridges which traversed the shallow dry tributary valley in which Columbia lay. The nearest water was in the canyon of the Stanislaus. Moultrie's flume was a slender, insecure affair, but it would bring him water. And with water, he would overnight become the biggest operator in the camp. Bennett and Delaney walked the length of the flume. A slide had taken out a section. It could have been a natural slippage and it could have been something else. A brush fire had burned another length. Almost certainly a deliberate incendiary attempt. Scantlings had been removed from a trestle so that it had sagged under its own weight and required almost complete rebuilding.

When his inspection was complete, Bennett returned to Moultrie's claim.

"What you paying your men?" he asked.

"Standard wages."

"The same as Crane?" Bennett prodded. Moultrie nodded agreement. "I'll see your flume stays together," Bennett went on. "You'll get your water, if you'll jack your wages up to where they ought to be and if you'll open up so anybody that wants to work can turn to for you—Chinese or anybody else."

"Nobody'll work with a Chinese but another Chink," Moultrie protested. "I'll jack the wages up if you get me water. Glad enough to do that. But I can't operate with a hundred per cent Chink crew and I can't get creek men on my gravel if I've got Chinese."

"The creek men'll work, all right," Bennett said quietly. "If they do, you'll agree?" Moultrie nodded again. "All right," Bennett continued. "Pass the word you're raising wages. Crane is going to whistle. Let him. Just pass the word and stick by it. Put your carpenters onto the flume. Every nail they drive will stick. I guarantee it."

"Get me out of hock to Crane and I'll cut you into a slice of the claim, Bennett," Moultrie said.

"There'll be a fee," Bennett said, "but you hold onto your claim. All of it. And don't worry about Crane until you've paid Miss Conant off. That comes first."

"She need the money back?"

"No. Like Crane, she wants the claim. And she'll get it if you give her half a chance."

"I thought you were her partner, Bennett," Moultrie said uneasily. "You could be pointing out the wrong tracks to me."

"I was her partner," Bennett said shortly. "If you think I'm pointing you wrong, let Miss Conant hang onto her loan and you'll see."

Moultrie looked unconvinced, but he agreed. Bennett and Delaney moved down the valley. Half a dozen times they stopped where groups of men were working. Bennett moved among them, talking of wages and the kind of a camp each group thought Columbia should be. Delaney trailed along with him, listening, his eyes wide. It was afternoon as they turned into the head of the camp's street.

"Not only you got hands, boy," Mike said. "You got a tongue, too. Crane is going to have you for sure, if he can."

"Crane and Ruth Conant," Bennett agreed. "Look, I've got work to do tonight. I need a little sleep. Supposing you let me use your bed again while you hit some of the lower claims. You heard what I was saying. Pass it along."

"What's the use of kicking up that dust,

boy?" Mike protested. "Ain't a shovel-hand in camp wouldn't like to trim his hours a mite and pocket a little more dust. But the dust comes out of the ground and the operators own the ground. They'll pay what they see fit and to hell with them on the shovel handles."

"You've got it wrong," Bennett said sharply. "There's kinds of operators. All of them have got to have a profit, but one wants it one way and one the next. They're all human enough. None of them is going to pay more than the next one for labor. We pound sense into the one that sets the price and the hours and we got them all seeing it right. A lot of them, like Moultrie, are going to be willing enough to go along, if we set the pattern with the trouble-maker, first."

"You get Abel Crane to operate his Pauper's Pit like a white man's diggings and I'll elect you mayor of Columbia, personally!" Delaney said scornfully.

"Better start electioneering while you're working through the claims this afternoon, then," Bennett said with a tight grin. "Turn me out at six."

CHAPTER FIVE

Rebellion

BENNETT did not sleep through until the supper hour. A Chinaman brought Ruth Conant to his door in mid-afternoon. Since Delaney's room was small and the brassy sun had made it hot, he came out under a small porch to talk to her.

"What are you and Mike up to, Jim?" she asked.

"What I promised you," Bennett answered bluntly. "Pulling an oar for Columbia."

"I'll have Crane on the run with the Oriental in a few weeks. And I'm bound to get control of a few claims while I'm about it. Half the miners in a camp don't want to work a good claim when they've got one. They want the quick money—and I'm going to have it for them—at my prices. Isn't that good enough, Jim? If you drive Crane too hard he's going to get even more reckless than he did last night. He can hire all the help he needs. You'll be alone. Can't we go on like we started?"

"No," Bennett said. "You hate the creek men. You're after their hair. And I'm a creek man too. I don't trust you, Ruth."

"Sometimes I think you're right," the girl said slowly. "Sometimes I think you're no different than the rest of the drunken scum that's come into these mountains, crazy to get rich the easy way—crazy to get everything the easy way—without a thread of decency in the lot! And yet, when I saw you in Golconda, when I heard what had happened to you, I thought maybe there was one man of my own kind in the Sierra, after all."

"If there is, you'd be more apt to find him hanging around Crane at the Congress," Bennett suggested.

"I've been kicked around since I landed at Sacramento. I've been laughed at and insulted and humiliated until I've got a lot due me. I told you, Jim, that I was going to have my payment. I am. I won't let you stop me. I'm going to do the kicking and humiliating. Maybe I sort of know what you've got in mind. Maybe I'm guessing you don't figure on giving Abel Crane time to realize the danger in you. You might force me to go down to the Congress and make a deal with Crane, after all."

"It'll be the kind of a deal you'll both understand," Bennett said.

"You're still thinking of Laura," Ruth Conant said. "All women aren't alike, Jim Bennett!"

"They look alike to me," Bennett answered.

The girl looked at him for a moment. He thought she was going to say something else. However, she did not. Turning swiftly, she hurried off through the shacks of Chinatown. Bennett went back into Delaney's room. Mention of Laura had bite to it. He had thought Laura was the richest woman he had ever known. He had made love to Laura because he wanted her. But he had not wanted her as much as he wanted Ruth Conant when he could shut Columbia and the Oriental and the bribed dealers and the sack of dust and currency in the cashier's cage from his mind. It was like whiskey, he thought—a poison which was torment because he knew too well the danger in it.

Going back into the shack, he stretched on the bed and tried to sleep again, but he was barely settled before a murmur of voices sounded outside and Mike Delaney hailed him. He went back outside. Forty

or fifty men had followed Mike into the tiny yard before the house. Beyond these were a number of Chinamen.

"I done what you told me, Jim," Delaney said. "I took the word down through the diggings. It must have made good listening. These boys figure talk ain't enough. They want to know what else you can do."

"If it's enough, Bennett," a man sang out, "we'll give you a hand. We got our bellies full of working for less pay than we could wash out of the gravel we're working with the water of our own sweat!"

"Maybe up at Moultrie's tonight," Delaney suggested.

Bennett shook his head sharply. "That's between Moultrie and me," he said. "A private matter. There's a better place to start. Abel Crane is reaching out to snag this whole camp. He's got to be stopped." Bennett paused, thinking of the guess Ruth Conant had voiced that he'd hit before Crane had a chance to defend himself or realize his danger. "And the place to stop him is at home," he went on. "Suppose you all drift down to Crane's pit—or half to his pit and half to his store. Leave his foreman and the clerks at the store alone. Talk to the men in the pit and those trading in the store. Friendly talk. Those that don't go to work in the pit in the morning for Crane's wages belong with you. Those who don't trade in the store at Crane's prices belong with you. Anybody that climbs into the pit tomorrow or walks into the store is going to be short of friends. Make it plain but friendly."

Papa Lee shoved forward from among the Chinamen. "We working long-time now small claims up the hill. Paying money to Mist' Crane for right to work them. Land supposed to be anybody's land for claiming, but Mist' Bennett say land belong to him. Chinese not crazy, just very patient."

"You've been patient too long, Lee," Bennett said. "When Crane sends a man around to collect from you up there, tell him to come to me."

"Plenty tough men work for Mist' Crane," Papa Lee said.

Bennett nodded. "You can't be expected to stand against them, alone. We'll send up a few of the boys who've been in Crane's pit. They'll work up there with you for a few days, on shares. Fifty per cent instead of the twenty-five Crane's been paying them. And they'll be there to back you up, Lee."

"Wait a minute, Bennett," a miner protested. "The damned Chinks have worked a lot of us out of jobs and they stick to themselves. We'll stick together, too. Nobody's going to work alongside no Chinamen!"

"Then to hell with the lot of you," Bennett said. "I'm not crowding my neck for a bunch of Polacks and Swedes and Yankees, then!" He turned on his heel.

The miner called out sharply. "Hold on, Bennett; don't get hasty. We got to have you, same as a charge has got to have a fuse. Reckon we all know that. You're one of us."

"And I'm a friend of Papa Lee's," Bennett cut in.

"And you're a friend of Papa Lee's," the miner agreed reluctantly. "This ain't the way any camp I ever saw operated, but there's got to be a first and I reckon Columbia's the place for it. Me, Id' like a few days on those Chink claims at fifty per cent, myself. How about it, Lee? Take me on?"

William C. Kelley*

has switched to Calvert because Calvert is mellower.

*of 5508 Windsor Mill Rd., Baltimore, Md.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City

The old man nodded gravely. "Yankee help very welcome. Chinese are small men, very weak men. Unable to move much gravel. Unable to find much gold. Very poor miners. Chinese very happy."

At this courteous, blandly extravagant falsehood, a number of grins appeared among the miners. The man who had protested working with the Chinese clapped a hand to Papa Lee's thin back.

"This is sure going to raise hell with Abel Crane!" he exulted.

"Plenty hell!" Papa Lee agreed solemnly.

"You better cut out three or four of the best boys to take up to Moultrie's with us tonight, Jim, boy," Delaney urged anxiously.

"I told you this was to be a private job," Bennett said shortly. "You stick with this bunch. See they raise hell with Crane's pits and his store and even the hotel. Shouldn't take much of a crowd to scare those girls Crane brought in clear back to the American River. I'll take care of the business at Moultrie's—if there is any. Crane's been handling miners too long to get really bushed by even a bunch of them, ganged up. But if he can be made to sweat a little over one man, he might get rash. And if he gets rash, we've got him."

"Maybe after he's gotten you," Delaney growled. "You're biting off more than a man can chew. Look at her this way, boy. You look a sight better standing in your own boots than you would in rock on top a monument on the main street!"

"All right," Bennett said grudgingly. "Come on up to Moultrie's in the morning, if I'm not back for breakfast. Till then, keep out of my tracks. I may want to travel fast sometime tonight."

"Never seen a man who could outrun a bullet yet!" Delaney muttered. He turned reluctantly away.

BENNETT found that Moultrie's crew had made a lot of progress in repairing damaged sections of their flume and had even started a new length, close to the camp. In thirty-six hours, if nothing happened, they'd have water on Seventy-Seven and Andrew Moultrie would be repaying his obligations with dust still wet from the sluices.

Bennett nodded satisfaction. "We're winding the string tight," he told the claim man. "Keep your crew on after dark. Spread them out in little parties along the flume. Make them understand they're supposed to look like they're working, but that they're really keeping watch. Tell them that whatever happens, not to put up a fight, themselves. I'll see they have reinforcements to do that. See each party has a lantern that'll be visible from your camp. Keep a couple of men on watch there. If one of the lanterns go out, send for me quickly. If there's trouble, your men may not be able to sound a warning, but anybody rushing the flume would sure as hell try to kill the lantern so they could finish their work in the dark."

"You think you can handle Crane?" Moultrie asked suspiciously.

"No," Bennett said. "He isn't my problem, so why should I? He's the camp's problem. The camp's going to handle him."

"If you muff this, Bennett, Crane'll break my back for sure," the miner growled. "If it don't come off, you'll have cost me my claim."

"Is your damned gravel worth any more than my neck?" Bennett snapped. "I'll be in town, somewhere around the Congress. You get word to me fast. That's all you've got to do."

Moultrie nodded uneasily. Bennett swung back toward the lights of Columbia. When he reached the street he saw that the miners Delaney had drummed up were doing their work with a relish. A thin, idling cordon was stretched around Crane's store, the Congress, and the Poker Dot saloon, which they had apparently added to the list on their own account. Those who tried to reach any of the three establishments were halted. There were brief words. Most of those reaching the line turned back willingly enough when they understood what was afoot. One or two, drunk or stubborn, protested. They were quieted efficiently.

Abel Crane was leaning against one of the pillars supporting the awning of the Congress. He seemed untroubled, but when he saw Bennett he called out sharply to him. Jim shoved through the cordon about the hotel and stepped up onto the walk under the awning.

"Understand you and your partner split up, Bennett," Crane said.

"Been listening at keyholes?" Jim sug-

gested as he looked the other man over.

Crane shook his head. "No. Been talking to Miss Conant. She wanted me to know that she had no part of whatever you did from here on. Seemed afraid I might figure she was in with you in something she seemed to think might happen tonight. Claimed she'd take my scalp, if she could, but with nice, clean competition, and that's all. Seemed to feel better when I told her I wouldn't hold Jim Bennett against her."

"You haven't got any more chance against her than you have against me, Crane," Bennett said flatly.

"Um," Crane answered thoughtfully. "Just the same, you're split up, you two, so that means you're out of a job, don't it?" Bennett nodded. Crane grinned. "Not unless you want to be, Bennett. You kick up a lot of dust. I'd rather have you scratching for me than against me. Clear this street in half an hour and I'll put you on as top foreman in my outfit. You'll have your slice out of everything from the Pit to the Congress."

"No," Bennett said.

"Won't go the whole way, eh?" Crane said. "But you're broke. Come here that way and you're apt to die the same way. Half a deal, then. Make a speech, do something to draw attention for ten minutes—long enough for me to get some guns and guards onto the street. That'll be all I need to show these mutton-headed folks that there's only one man big enough to boss this camp! You'll be able to walk out of Columbia in the morning with enough dust in your pockets to drag your pants off their belt-loops."

Bennett shook his head.

"Won't none of those fools on the street know you deliberately give me a chance. They'll only figure luck ran against you. Don't be a fool, Bennett!"

Crane's voice had taken on an edge.

Bennett smiled. "If I am, I've got company," he told Crane. "Save your offers. There'll be a boss in Columbia. Camp's got to have one. But from here on it'll take a fair shake to keep the dice down. Post new prices in your store, Crane. Tell your girls inside to leave the sledge-hammers out of the drinks you're serving in there. Teach them to keep their hands out of the customers' pockets. Pay a regular wage scale at your pits. And quit crowding the Chinese. Figure Columbia belongs to somebody else but you and maybe you'll end up boss, after all."

"You're going to look awful good dead, Bennett," Crane said thinly.

Bennett stepped down from the walk. He looked out over the cordons of miners on the street.

"I think I'd count noses out before I fired the first shot, Crane," he suggested.

Moving down the street, he located Delaney.

"Watch Crane closely," he said. "He's got some guards, some place. He'll try to sneak them into the crowd and cut us off from his places. If he tries, don't wait. Give him the same thing he tried to give Ruth at the Oriental, last night. If he gets those guards and their guns on the street, we'll have to fold. A clean camp won't mean anything to dead men."

DELANEY nodded and moved briskly off among the idling miners, pausing for a word here and there. Bennett thought it was odd that the little Irishman did not inquire why he had come back so soon from Moultrie's claim and what the situation there might be, particularly since Delaney had been so dead set against Jim handling whatever occurred at Moultrie's alone. He got his answer soon enough. He had dropped down past the Poker Dot to see how the miners isolating the bar were faring. As he started back up the street, Andrew Moultrie and what appeared to be his entire crew filed out of the brush and onto the street. Moultrie saw Bennett and crossed to him.

"What the devil?" Jim growled. "How you expect me to do anything for you at your flume if you're down here with your boys?"

"Delaney sent a man up to see me, Bennett," Moultrie said earnestly. "I'm glad he did. Let me know what was going on here in town. Listen, I'd rather have the right kind of camp in this valley than water on my claim, right now. I can always get the water later, but if Crane's going to be stopped, this is the time to stop him. We'll all pull together, for one thing at a time. We'll make out, all right."

"Crane may have some boys back of the ridges right now with orders to wreck that flume again. You can't go on rebuilding it

forever, Moultrie. And I'd better warn you that if you run out of cash again, Miss Conant'll have your claim."

The miner shrugged. "I'll only have to rebuild once more after tonight, at worst," he said. "And if that partner of yours wants my claim so bad she'll squeeze for blood to get it, she can have it!"

Turning, Moultrie barked orders at his men. They moved on up the street in a tight group. Bennett followed them more slowly. At the upper end of the Chinatown block he saw Ruth Conant standing on the porch of the house he had shared with her.

She spoke when he was opposite her. "Look at those fools!" she said scornfully, indicating the miners grouped loosely in the street. "Swaggering, now. But wait till Crane cracks down. They'll run like whipped dogs!"

Crane's wiser than you are, Ruth," Bennett said quietly. "He knows he doesn't dare crack down—unless he can get the boys off of the street for a few minutes. And it looks to me like they're going to stay there all night."

The girl stirred restlessly. "What's happening up by the Congress? Jim, I'm a little afraid. Why don't they put a ring around the Oriental, too? I wish I could see what's going on."

"Come on, then," Bennett invited. "You're safe and the Oriental's safe. You're a woman, Ruth. That's enough for these boys. They might hate you, but they'll leave you and yours alone. The only men in this camp who would bother a woman are inside of that stubborn, nasty-thinking head of yours. It's time you realized that decency doesn't have to have a varnished up polish on it to be courtesy. There have been a few gentlemen in the Sierra camps—a few . . . ."

The girl's lips compressed. She said nothing. But she swung along the walk with Bennett. Opposite Crane's store she saw Papa Lee and a number of the Chinamen moving in the cordon about the place, exchanging talk with others of the miners, laughing and wholly at ease among them. A miner stopped Papa Lee to tell him something and draped an arm confidentially across his shoulder.

Bennett saw the direction of the girl's glance and grinned suddenly. "A common cause does it," he said. "Chinatown is done in Columbia. Papa Lee and his friends can build where they please, from here on. And they'll have friends to build next to."

"You're forgetting Crane, Jim Bennett," the girl said. "You've done something terrible. You've turned control over to men who don't know what to do with it. Something like this can destroy Columbia. Will these wild men pay any attention to camp and discovery rules, to the rights of claimants, to the regulations, after tonight? Why should they after they've made the biggest man in the camp run his businesses the way they want them run?"

"I'm not forgetting Crane," Bennett said quietly. "I'm waiting for him. He's got to call quits or he's got to make his move. He can't stand still and do nothing much longer. You're forgetting something yourself, Ruth. These wild men of yours are the ones who made the camp and discovery rules in the first place. They're the ones who set down what a claim should be and how a man could establish his ownership. They're not trying to tell Crane how to run his business. They're telling him that there are rules—even for hotels and stores and leased claims—and that he's been breaking them. They're telling him to stick by the rules or they'll stand against him. They don't want Crane's store or his hotel or his pit. They don't want your casino. They want a square camp. And they're going to get it!"

CRANE was still on the walk in front of the Congress. He nodded pleasantly over the heads of the encircling miners at Ruth Conant. A few of the miners turned to glance at her. There was no friendliness in their eyes, but there was no comment.

"You'll go broke if you stand still, Crane," Bennett called to him. "You've got to have hands in the pit and trade in the store and hotel. We'll stay here all night and all tomorrow and all next week. We'll stay as long as we have to."

"You're impatient, Bennett," Crane answered easily. He grinned. "I don't intend to stand here half the night, let alone weeks. I'll be getting to you, directly."

Bennett moved on through the miners. At the upper end of the block he turned with Ruth Conant close beside him. He was astonished to see the knot in front of the Congress beginning to pull away from the

hotel, swirling and apparently refocusing along the Chinatown street front.

"Come on!" he grunted at the girl, and he began to run back down the street. As he passed the Congress Abel Crane called out to him:

"Look who's moving, now!"

Bennett ignored him. He overhauled the moving group of miners and planted himself in front of the leaders.

"You fools!" he roared at them. "Get back into the street. Keep the pressure up, keep the blockade going. If Crane gets enough time to get his hired guns along the walks, we'll have to give up. We'll have to pull in our horns and wait for another chance—which he'll try mighty damned hard to give us. We've about got him. Get back there!"

Andrew Moultrie shoved forward.

"There's a fire going in one of the buildings in Chinatown. We got to get to it. It's—it's Miss Conant's casino."

Bennett swore. This was how Crane had worked it. Torching the Oriental would set Ruth back if not wipe her out. And it also would cause a diversion during which he could brace himself.

"The hell with it!" he snapped. "Get back on the street. There isn't a balanced wheel or an unmarked deck of cards in the place, anyhow. It ought to go!"

Moultrie shook his head stubbornly. "It belongs to Miss Conant. She's alone, since you quit her. After the kind of games we saw being run in there last night there isn't a man in camp would drop a copper on the tables, but be damned if we can let a woman get burned out in our camp. Get out of the way, Bennett!"

More of the miners growled impatiently. The press surged forward. Bennett swore again, knowing this was not something which could be stopped. Ruth Conant pushed past him and faced the restless men. Her eyes were wide, a kind of stunned look in them.

She spoke very softly. "You'd drop everything you were trying to win back there on the street to put out a fire in my place, when you all hate me, and because I'm a woman?" she asked.

"Yes'm," Moultrie said uneasily. "Because you're about the first woman into Columbia who hasn't put up at the Congress. Most of us get kind of lonesome for a woman, the right kind. Now if you'd step back . . . come on, boys, or the place'll be plumb gone!"

"Wait!" Ruth's voice rang out. "Get back on the street. Finish up what you started, before Crane can make real trouble. Let the Oriental go. Let all Chinatown go. We can get together and put up new shacks. The old ones are a disgrace to the kind of a camp Columbia will be tomorrow. Come on, boys, let's get back on the street, quickly!"

Lifting her skirt, Ruth stepped down from the walk and started at a run up through the dust toward the Congress. Bennett ran beside her. Moultrie and Mike Delaney and the rest of the miners strung out behind them. Among these were Papa Lee and his fellows, deliberately turning their backs on their own quarters, blandly relying on the promise that tomorrow would be a new day in Columbia.

Crane was no longer leaning against a pillar. He was hastily marshaling a line of men with rifles along the walk under his awning. Seeing the crowd pouring back, he wheeled frantically.

"Rush him!" Bennett shouted.

"No!" Ruth protested. "Wait! All of you. Look. The Congress is the only other building in the block with Chinatown. Our streets are wide. We'll watch that the fire doesn't jump them. And we'll watch Mr. Crane and his men. Since they want to stand out here in front with guns leveled at us, we'll see that they do it, while the hotel burns up behind them!"

A slow grin formed here and there on the faces of the miners. In a moment a number of them were laughing heartily.

"Jim Bennett's a fool to quit something like that!" a man said.

"Miss, how's for takin' me on as partner? I can do handsome by you," another called.

"Now there's a skirt with more to it than the lace, boys!" a third added.

Ruth looked up at Jim Bennett. He thought there were tears in her eyes. "Insults, Jim," she breathed. "That's what I thought it was. Rot. Hands reaching. I could see them out there across the footlights, and I didn't understand!" She paused. "The camps have their own language, I guess. I understand, it, now."

"Do you?" Bennett asked. He tipped

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HELL-OVER-THE-HILL!

He forgot the whip that had flayed him; forgot the wagon-tongue gallows rope that had missed his neck by seconds. He knew only that the caravan he captained must roll on west, to safety for a thousand pioneers at barren, gray Fort Klassen, where the last Army pay-call awaited an unsung frontier hero: *Abner John Yokum: coward and deserter. . . .*

He ended by heading off Hosmer's driver . . . .

Gripping Novel of the Great Western Trek

By

E. Hoffmann Price

CHAPTER ONE

The Fourth Deserter

THE four deserters from Fort Galer were having a high-heeled old time, camped in a crater overlooking lava beds and the trail leading west. They had rations and cavalry horses; also some whiskey not good enough for a white man, though too good for an Indian. All wore civilian clothes. Two had stolen pistols. The others were unarmed.

Loud-mouthed Barnes wiped his chin

and got to his feet to mimic the first sergeant at reveille. "Sir, four privates absent!"

Wallace did his horse-faced best to burlesque Captain Slade standing at parade rest. "Take your post, sir. And shove it."

Short began to sing an obscene army tune.

The others drowned him out by chanting the one about Colonel Fitch, whose name furnished rhyme for a catchy chorus. Ab Yokum, dutifully joining in, figured it'd be smart to stay sober and keep an eye on the back trail. A patrol might be on the way from Fort Galer to arrest them.

He peeped cautiously over the lava rim. "Hey, pipe down! There's dust, back yonder."

Barnes clambered up, got a look, then bawled, "This John can't tell troop dust from wagon dust. It's another train of emigrant wagons."

Yokum, who had only six months less service than Barnes, shook his head. "Ain't a wagon train."

"That old son of a Fitch can't track us," Wallace declared derisively. "Not over rock and not with our hosses' hoofs wadded with hunks of blanket."

Yokum resumed his watch. Though still certain he was justified in going over the hill, he'd seen and heard enough to know his choice of comrades had been bad. The three boasted they had enlisted in the East only to get government transportation as far west as possible. Later they planned to make for the mines in Leadville, Colorado.

Yokum, on the other hand, after enlisting in good faith, had got a snootful of Colonel Fitch. The colonel, claiming that the regiment didn't assay two-bits worth of soldier to the ton, set out to make it military. Then there was Captain Slade, whose air of living alone in a world inhabited by only one perfect cavalryman, had infuriated Yokum as had neither hard riding, hard discipline nor hard punishment. To Yokum, there was a difference between a planned swindle and getting relief from a real grievance.

A horseman emerged from the dust and rode out in advance of a single covered wagon drawn by three span of mules. A saddle mount and four spare mules followed the wagon. It was a good outfit, good as the best of the many which had rolled into Fort Galer to rest and refit for the final push westward.

Near sunset the wagon reached the green spot along the trail. Later a fire winked and the desert wind brought the smell of coffee and bacon. It was then Yokum learned that his three buddies were no-accounts from way back.

One of the cavalry mounts, having lost a shoe, was lame. Another had a galled back because of a carelessly folded blanket.

"Them sodbusters," Wallace said, "don't need riding hosses as bad as we do. Short, you and me'll mosey down to get us some remounts. The rest of you sit tight."

Yokum had left his father's farm because he didn't like it; he'd quit the army; and now it was up to him to leave the comrades with whom he had deserted. His past record of quitting gave him little pride, yet there was nothing he could do to talk the three out of horse thievery. They'd hardly let him strike out on his own, lest he be picked up and then, to save his own hide, tell of their destination and doings. But he saw one way of breaking away from them.

He said, "Supposing me and Barnes go first and pretend we're lost and afoot. Moan and holler and fall down like we've given out in sight of help. The sodbusters'll go out with lanterns to find us, and you'll have a chance at the hosses. Even if someone stays by the wagon, they'll be too interested to notice you."

They liked this idea. Once they got their mounts out of the shallow crater and down the treacherous slope, Yokum and Barnes set out afoot to bait the sodbusters.

NEARLY an hour before moonrise they crossed the wagon trail. Stars big as the rowels of Mexican spurs thinned the desert gloom. The lava beds were dark in contrast to the earth and its wide-spaced clusters of gray-green vegetation. By full moonlight this would become a silver gray glamour, eye-tricking and confusing to pursuers, yet good for a get-away.

Yokum smelled horses and the fragrance of smouldering mesquite. He could not yet distinguish the wagon cover, but when the wind perked up it whittled ash film from coals whose glow marked the camp.

"Wind's wrong," Barnes said when they halted. "Dogs don't scent us."

"It'll shift again. Let's get closer."

"This is near enough," Barnes argued. "Getting closer before we sound off will mean the sodbusters will be too near for Short and Wally to work right."

"Guess you're right," Yokum admitted.

During the prowl he had taken his spare socks, fitting one into the other. In the foot of the inner sock he had put a smooth rock the size of a goose egg. This bludgeon was Yokum's answer to horse thieving. He clipped Barnes and spent a dreadful moment wondering if the man would pull his pistol or just stand there. He let out a shuddering breath when Barnes finally toppled. Barnes wouldn't know his own name for quite some time.

Yokum made for the wagon with long strides. Brush crackled. A dog snarled. A man challenged, "Hold it there!"

The voice, low and level, came from a clump of mesquite well away from camp. Yokum said, Mister, watch yourself, there's hoss-thieves fixing to get busy."

"What's that?"

"Hoss-thieves. I got away from them but they don't know it yet. Pull your gun and shoot a couple times."

"What in hell do you think I am, showing a gun flash? I've got you skylined. Come closer and move slow!"

Without warning, the speaker popped up from cover. He had a rifle lined on Yokum's belt buckle. "What's the idea of my shooting?" He asked then.

A second man called from camp, "Seth, what's going on?"

"Something funny, Jake. You watch close." Then, to Yokum: "Start talking."

Yokum talked fast. Since, like the other deserters, he wore jeans, denim shirt and civilian slouch hat, he made no reference to his army background. Aside from that, he gave Seth Gilman a straight story. "Come on," he concluded. "and I'll show you the gent I slugged. I want you to fire a couple shots to make it sound like me and him got shot up. Then they'll run instead of making more trouble."

That convinced Gilman. The Winchester whacked three times. Yokum let out a yell. Jake Weems, the sodbuster's helper, come to meet the two. "You'd hardly cut loose," he said, "when I heard somebody riding to skin hell, over yonder. He was strikin' sparks every jump."

Minutes later Yokum and the sodbusters sat down by the fire. Seth Gilman was a big man with a squarish face and well-kept beard the color of straw. He was old enough to be Yokum's father.

Jake Weems was long-faced and stooped. His mouth drooped; so did his tobacco-stained mustaches. As he listened to Yokum's plea he studied first his knotty hands and then Seth Gilman's eyes.

Yokum said, "Look-ee here, Mr. Gilman, I need help. It don't give me the best character, slugging one of the men I was running with, but I was in a fix, and from stealing hosses there's no telling what they'd gone to. I'd ended up either by being like them or else getting knocked on the head to shut me up."

Weems spat at the coals and wiped his lips. Gilman's shaggy brows drooped. He nodded, pondering, as he looked through and beyond Yokum. "Better alone than in bad company."

"A man can't make his way alone in this country," Yokum said, "so I couldn't cut loose from those fellows I took up with. I can skin mules and handle livestock. I can work for my keep. Just let me string along with you to wherever you're going."

The older man exchanged glances, as though each read the other's face. But to Yokum they were poker faces which told nothing except that these were not men to be driven against good judgment by the first kindly impulse.

Finally Gilman said, "Abner, the rest of my party is a couple of days ahead, waiting for us. Right now I'm loaded with things we didn't know we needed while we were at Fort Galer. It takes a shakedown to show up the weak spots, so I stayed until this new wagon was finished and let my second in command go on and get practice in bossing the train. Once we're rolling again, it'll be too late to correct mistakes. We're going into country where you have to be right. Right about wagons, right about men, about animals."

Abner Yokum's eyes dropped before the steady gaze. "I know what you mean," he said slowly. "I'm a no-account. You either got to run me out of camp or put up with me."

"That's right. You turned against bad company, for your own good and for ours. We're heading west to develop new coun-

try, to make new lives for ourselves, not because we have to, but because we want to. I don't have it in me to deny a young fellow a change to make a new life for himself. Spread a blanket under the wagon. Jake and I'll take turns watching tonight."

WHEN he reached the shakedown camp, Yokum's first day kept him busy. There were saddle mounts, mules, oxen, and milch cows to be tended. Some of the women were spreading laundry out to dry. Others, including Seth Gilman's daughter Sabina, were mending and darning. Children prowled about, gathering dry brush and mesquite roots several men were grubbing out for future campfires.

Gilman and his lieutenant, Virgil Hosmer, went from wagon to wagon, from one mess group to the other, checking up and advising. The latter, a dark man who filled the eyes of all the women who saw him, was inclined to give orders where a hint would have been enough.

The sodbusters and their roustabouts paid little attention to Yokum as he went about his chores. The Golden West Association had been newly organized at Fort Galer. It was made up of emigrants from all over the East.

Toward evening Yokum found a chance to improve on his first few words with Sabina Gilman. The blonde girl had kept house for her father since her mother's death; responsibility had given her a sweetness and dignity which attracted Yokum, and which also made him shy away. For the first time his background made him uncomfortable. He wished his past could stand up before Sabina's level eyes and be worthy of the friendliness with which she had welcomed him at breakfast.

"Let me give you a hand with that hamper," he said as he finished tending the last of the mules.

"Oh, thanks, it *is* heavy."

Each time he saw her, she looked better. She'd be no more than shoulder high to him if she took off her sunbonnet; but all there was of her was well-shaped and graceful. Her voice was low enough to be restful against the background of children's screeching and the other women's cackling.

When he had boosted the laundry hamper into the wagon, Sabina laid a hand on his arm. "Sit down a minute, there's some dried apple pie left over, and it'll be some time before supper. You've been racing around like a wildman all day."

Despite the day's hard work, Sabina's gingham dress was hardly rumpled. She had nice hands, shapely and competent, ever so much better to see than the sleek hands of the Fort Galer honkytonk girls. She didn't shy away from a man who'd been wrangling mules and cleaning harness. Sitting there, friendly-like, was something new in Yokum's life.

Then Virgil Hosmer came up, tall and arrogant on his long-legged bay. Afoot or on horse, he carried himself with confidence near enough to a swagger to make him good to look at. He had a lot of backslappers among the men. Sabina's eyes and smile had a new animation which made Yokum feel left out of things.

"Oh, give your horse a rest, Virgil," Sabina said. "Let me get you some pie."

Instead of answering, he jerked his thumb and said to Yokum, "Nobody's through with chores till everyone's through. Go find yourself something to do."

He dismounted then and sat down.

When Yokum went to help the other roustabouts, he learned that there had not been any unfinished chores. He spat, cursed and turned to make for a group of men who sat by a wagon, chawing tobacco and talking. He moved slowly, feet dragging, head down. He stopped short when a shadow crossed his way. Gilman, hands on the saddle horn, looked gravely down at him.

"I saw it, Ab. You think Virgil's riding you?"

"Well, sir, you asked me straight and I'll answer the same way. It sure looks like it."

Gilman nodded. "Whether yes or no, it makes no difference. Sabina's good-hearted, and there are worse appearing young men around here than you. But she likes Virgil."

"So do all the women folks!"

Gilman forgave the interruption with a smile. "And Virgil thinks a lot of her. Use your head, Ab. You're a good worker but we don't know you from Adam's off-ox."

"You mean I shouldn't talk to her?"

"I said, use your head. If Virgil takes a notion to ride you, your work won't be any easier and neither will mine."

CHAPTER TWO

Flogging Sentence

"YOU drive Dawson's mules," Gilman directed on the morning the wagon train pulled out. "He's a damn sick man. Everybody's got to give a hand to whoever needs it."

This had been made clear by the terms of the articles of Association which Yokum had signed as an unpaid employee. In setting his name to the agreement he had bound himself to obey the by-laws of a colony on wheels and take orders from captain or second in command.

When it came his turn to get into column, Yokum popped the whip. The jugheads bent against their collars and the wagon jounced over the ruts. Dust was already rising and as the hours wore on dust cracked Yokum's lips. It reddened his eyes and caked his throat.

Finally the woman who tended the ailing Dawson thrust her head from the wagon cover and said, "Son, here's a plug of my old man's tobacco. Maybe you'd like a chew to cut the dust."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I never learned to use it."

At the end of the noon halt, a moment before Gilman gave the order to start rolling, there was a whip crack and a shout behind Yokum. A wagon pulled alongside. It bounced and lurched as the mules broke into a run. Before Yokum could realize what went on, Hosmer's team was cutting in front of him. Order in column, originally decided by lot, went thereafter by turn, so that the leader of one day's drive took the tail end on the following day, with everyone else moving up a single notch.

"Hey, you!" Yokum shouted. "Get back in your place!"

He had to pull up to keep his lead mules from running afoul of the other's tail gate. Stealing a full day's advantage riled Yokum. When he protested to Hosmer the second in command said, "Next time keep closed up. I'll speak to Breed later."

Dry camp that night didn't improve tempers. Though an accordion player drew derisive answers from a coyote not far from the circle of wagons, Gilman had to break up several quarrels. Hosmer looked the other way and monopolized Sabina.

In the morning, Hosmer's mule-skinner stole another notch in column. The sight made Yokum grit his teeth but in seconds he controlled his temper, realizing that raising a ruction would only make it harder on Gilman, who had his hands full already.

Word was passed that Gilman had returned to the head of the column with news of water. Later, squinting into the blaze of a low sun, Yokum saw stunted vegetation and a spread of grass. But as he came to the next and somewhat lower crest, from which he could again look over the tops of the wagons ahead, he knew that unless each driver awaited his turn the pool would be fouled and muddy beyond use, long before all animals could drink.

A regiment of cavalry could water there, easily. But this wagon train, with perhaps no more than a third as many animals, would waste and ruin, rather than use. Already, mules and oxen quickened their pace. They'd be increasingly hard to handle, though they'd not been unwatered long enough to cause real trouble.

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Suddenly a team of quick-stepping mules wheeled out of column to get from behind a number of ox-drawn outfits. Gilman shouted, but the rattle of gear, the clatter of wheels and the bawling of oxen drowned his voice. Hosmer, trying to keep order, succeeded no better than Gilman.

Yokum swung out of column somewhat, because the team behind was pulling out, but principally because Hosmer's driver was one of the first to start hogging it.

"Hang on!" Yokum shouted to those riding in his wagon. "We're getting a drink, or bust!"

"Get there first, bub!" the woman cried. "Me and Lem can stand it."

Yokum knew where he was going. He knew what boulders to avoid, where to swerve to dodge a wallow. He kept his team in hand, flicking each rump as needed, so that all six animals pulled together, with never an instant when one was "carried" by the others.

He ended by heading off Hosmer's driver. Wheels locked. Mules reared and snorted. They ran afoul of each other's trace chains. Household goods spewed from the rear of Dawson's wagon; the woman screamed.

Hosmer's driver, knocked from the seat, came up raging. He struck with his whip. Now that the wagons checked each other, and the wallowing of thrown mules kept the others from dragging the tangle, Yokum leaped from his wagon to the other and thence to the ground. The whip cut him again; then he got inside the man's reach.

They weren't matched for size, but that made no difference. Yokum's fist smashed against a stubbled chin. He drove a left to the skinner's stomach. The man staggered, coughed out a cud of tobacco and moved in. He clipped Yokum with a right, then shifted his whip from his left to ply the loaded stock.

Yokum, groggy, lunged under the blow and butted the man. They toppled in a heap and grappled for a hold, rolling in flint, cactus and yucca blades until Hosmer and Gilman broke it up.

Meanwhile, the pool was jammed with plunging, kicking animals.

One of Hosmer's mules had a broken leg. The other team was unharmed. Hosmer's eyes were black with anger. A sudden rush of sweat had made mud of the dust which caked his face. His eyes were blazing.

"You damned fool!" he choked.

"Steady, Virgil!" Gilman snapped. "Your man's been making a practice of hogging things."

"We'll have a trial, by God!" Hosmer raged. "Fighting's a violation of the by-laws. Someone's going to pay for my mule! You'll pay—because this son is your man!"

THAT night the men gathered to hear Hosmer's claim. Breed, the driver, sat with his boss. Yokum sat with Jake Weems. As they watched the firelight dance on tanned and weary faces, Weems said, "Ab, don't feel too bad about putting Gilman in a tough corner. Virgil's doing this account he was sore from the start that he wasn't elected captain."

Gilman sat on a packing box, behind a barrel on which was the book containing the articles of Association, the roll of emigrants and the journal of the trip. He wasn't judge. He was on hand only to keep order. The entire group would vote on the decision.

"It's not a matter of my man getting out of line," Hosmer summed up. "Grant that Breed was wrong. But Yokum endangered two teams, two wagons—and the Dawsons riding with him. He did that instead of eating a bit more dust. Making a man eat dust out of turn isn't right, but it's not in a class with what Yokum did. He'd owe Dawson for the mule if the mule had been Dawson's instead of mine. It's your duty, gentlemen, to forget whose mule we had to shoot. Yokum works for Mr. Gilman. It'd be the same for whoever he worked."

Jake Weems got up. His tobacco cud filled out one sunken cheek. "Gentlemen, don't forget a number of you raced. Other wagons locked, only the drivers got 'em unsnarled afore the animals busted any legs. Yokum didn't have a chance to handle his team. Breed come up slashing with a whip. That made the mules plunge around crazier. Mr. Hosmer said it might've been a Dawson mule ruined. You either call it hazard of travel, or else you got to say it is up to Mr. Hosmer to stand the loss. His man hit Yokum with a whip and a man can't take that from any man. Yokum can't pay and Mr. Gilman hadn't ought to pay. Call it a stand-off and let it learn us a lesson."

There were mutters of approval until

Hosmer got up and shot off his mouth.

"Captain, Yokum took the aggressive, endangering lives. I'm not pleading for the price of a mule. I brought extra animals because I expected losses. Jake Weems made that clear, and I accept. Let's forget cash values and bear down on justice. I demand a penalty against the man who made a grave danger out of ordinary human impatience."

It was not so much his height as the way he carried himself that gave Hosmer force. The command in his tone was softened by persuasion. His glance invited men into his fellowship. He made participants of those who saw him. He made them want the justice he wished.

He paused for a moment. Then: "Flog him at a wagon wheel."

"Wait!" Gilman called. "You're not—"

"You are presiding, Captain. We—all of us—the men who elected you—let them speak."

"Whip the young pup and learn him a lesson!" a Hosmer supporter shouted, and others took it up.

This was democracy on wheels. The voters had voted. Whatever the by-laws might have said, Hosmer had imposed his will.

Gilman was in a pocket. Permitting this to happen was bad. Bucking it would upset what leadership he still kept. He looked at Yokum and slowly shook his head, confessing helplessness and disavowing what he could not prevent. Yokum grinned crookedly. It was good to have this man's kindness, though it hurt to be responsible for the pass to which his hot-headness had brought things.

Then Sabina burst into the group. She cried, "Oh, you've got to humor him, humor his spite! You've got to hurt someone, and love it!" She turned on Hosmer, whose face had become redder than firelight could have made it. She thrust under his nose a chatelaine watch. "This was my mother's. It's worth a span of mules. I'll pay you to be decent if you think you could stand the strain!"

Nothing else could have turned Hosmer's back-slappers against him; but this did, because thought of someone else's welfare had made her beautiful, had given her strength.

Yokum got to his feet.

"Ma'am, my hide ain't worth your mother's keepsake. Whichever way things go, there's trouble for your father." He had their attention now and he raised his voice. "Let Breed and me both be flogged. Then there's no hard feeling either way, and there's two lessons to everyone."

Gilman got up. "Do it that way!

Yokum peeled off his shirt, flung it to the ground, stretched his arms, flexed his back. He eyed the scowling Breed and grinned. "Jake flogs you. Your best friend flogs me. If you don't like it, beg Mr. Hosmer's friends not to let it happen."

CHAPTER THREE

The First Cairn

THE flogging could have been worse, Yokum told Sabina as she doctored his back. He added, "It's worth it, makin' a monkey out of Hosmer. Best yet, your father hasn't shooed you away from me."

"He won't," she assured him. "He likes you, but you were a total stranger, and Virgil—anyway, *that's* all over."

Suddenly the girl stopped talking. She didn't speak again until the chore was done. Then she asked in a strained voice, "Ab, how did you get those scars on your back? They're not old."

It hadn't occurred to him that the dozen lashes he'd got at Fort Galer for insubordination and insolence might have left marks. He could not tell the truth, which would put her in the position of knowingly harboring a deserter.

"Honey," he said, "I give you my word, I'm no criminal. If I'd been a thief or the like, I'd sure not tried to keep your dad's hosses from getting stolen. Can you let it go at that?"

"Of course!" she exclaimed. "After seeing how you got these—these stripes tonight—I won't tell anyone."

The following evening a prospector with two burros hailed the encampment. The emigrants made him welcome, for the lone traveler made up for many days of loneliness. He talked of gold he had found, and of his next strike. Though ragged, the desert rat plainly felt superior to people who proposed to till the earth instead of make a stack at one digging.

"And what's more," he carried on,

"you're pure fools, follering this trail. It takes you to hell and gone outen the way afore you get to the Hassayampa River."

The tired emigrants brightened at the words of a man who had prowled desert and mountain, outwitting Apaches, claim-jumpers and renegades. The specimens of quartz he spread out, each veined with wheat-colored gold, gave him authority.

"But," Seth Gilman said, "shortcuts are dangerous. The route we follow is proved. Hard, rough, but you get there."

The desert rat had an answer: "For freighters with their whacking big wagons, that's Gospel, mister. But shucks, these you're pulling is suthin' else. Grades are steep, for sure, but you can double-team."

Hosmer's eyes gleamed. "Tell me some more."

"Ain't nothing much to tell. The prospector traced lines on the earth. "Make for that gunsight pass. Onct you're over it, you head for three peaks the color of cream with a splash of red. They're volcano peaks. Beyond that there's a cut that knifes through a ledge of black rock. Saves you sixty or eighty miles. There's a whale of a lot of game, the country ain't scrawny like the flats. There's wood, too. You won't be picking up cow chips—and cussing when they been rained on."

To buck Hosmer and back Gilman, Yokum chipped in, "I bet there's gold on the way?"

That was a mistake. The sharp-eyed man hefted a chunk of ore whose weight plainly showed how much gold it held.

"Some float I puck up, what do *you* think?"

Hosmer smiled. "All right, does it look like pyrites to you?"

Yokum swallowed his own smoke. "You and Mr. Gilman figure that out."

It was not until the next day's halt that the emigrants had to make their decision; and during that march Hosmer had lost no time. The prospector, having done his damage, had gone his way, but Hosmer carried on.

There was a "town meeting" that night. Gilman vainly argued, "You never heard of a prospector telling where he made a strike."

"He didn't say he made a strike, he didn't say he was filing," someone retorted. "He admitted it was what they call float. but that's not the point. It's the short cut that counts. Eighty miles is five-six days saved, with these dang creeping oxen."

"They can graze where your jugheads'd starve," an ox owner flared up. "You take the long way, moving fast, if you want."

What these people needed, Yokum decided, was one man who knew his business and who knew how to make people pull together. But Gilman offered the articles of Association instead of a command. He said, "We signed up to go to the Hassayampa Valley to farm. Here are your names. Let us abide by it."

HOSMER got up. "That is where and why we are going. There are others going, too. A large party had a start on us, while you were fooling around at Galer, getting yourself a tailor-made wagon better than anyone else's. They'll get the best pickings unless we take a shortcut."

He paused impressively. During the silence he had created to get them wondering what he would say next, he caught the eye of one and another of his back-slappers, men who had never conceded that he had got a setback in his trial of Yokum.

Hosmer went on, "If you don't want to play it for our best advantage, I can break this train in two. I'll leave with so big a piece of it following me that you'll be out of luck going the long way. Men, what do you say?"

His admirers popped to their feet. "We're in favor, Virgil!"

Others got up. They were not a majority but they carried weight. Gilman's face tightened. His eyes sharpened with anger but he kept his voice level when he answered the challenge. "Rather than hurt all these people, including those who would follow you, I shall agree. We have to work together. . . ."

In the morning began the shortcut which was to test Gilman's belief in forbearance, meeting the other fellow half way. Yokum said to Sabina, "I sure admire your dad as a man, but he should've laid that fellow out or shot him in his tracks. You can't have two bosses in any outfit."

Yokum took over the Gilman mules. Jake Weems had ridden with Gilman to size up the trail ahead and to bag some of the game which the prospector had mentioned. There was a shortage of pickles.

Wild game, however, would prevent scurvy.

For several days the shortcut looked promising. Then came a ravine. The prospector, used to burros, had over-estimated its width. The cleft narrowed until not a wagon could pass. Yokum spent two days swinging a sledge to punch holes for the gunpowder to blast away the buttress.

All that he and a dozen others got for their trouble was blistered hands. The tamped earth blew out. The rocky shoulder, though cracked, remained in place. When the smoke cleared, and everyone had done telling where and how deep the holes should have been drilled, there was talk about retreating and picking up the main trail again.

After cursing the stupidity of the prospector, Hosmer said, "Folks, it's plain from looking at it that this cleft is not too narrow. The wagons are too wide." He acknowledged the appreciation he had played for, and then delivered his payoff. "Too wide by the amount the hubs and wheels poke out on each side of the wagon bed. But if we take the axles off, the bed isn't too wide, you can sled it through, once you clear away the boulders."

"Listen to me," Yokum bawled, "and save the trouble of taking wheels off and putting 'em on again. The narrowness don't reach up much more than wheel-high, and then the walls slope back, far enough. Just cut some trees and heap some rocks and make a ramp, up to where there is width enough. Drive over, and there you are!"

The bottleneck was so short that Yokum's way was by far the easier. Later, he went to the captain and said, "Mr. Gilman, I'm sorry I ran off at the mouth, instead of talking to you on the Q.T."

Gilman looked at him a moment. "I'm glad you got credit."

"I wasn't craving any. Getting through quick is what counts. Our animals aren't grazing too well on this trail, and our own grub isn't plentiful any more."

"There could be a time when it will be good for you to be known for good headwork, Ab," Gilman said reflectively.

It was not the words but the tone which made Yokum ask uneasily, "How you mean that?"

Gilman's dark mood changed. "Have you ever seen a man get hump-shouldered from having a good head? Get to work now, you're next to lead off over your woodpile."

The following day scared Yokum out of a week's growth. The trail followed a narrow shelf which overhung a two-hundred-foot drop to a rocky bed. There were no more than six inches to spare. In some stretches, the wagons had to be canted, inside wheels riding the cliff, so that the outer ones wouldn't go over the edge. Not even the sick were allowed to ride. Some drivers balked, including Breed.

Hosmer took his place. Yokum broke into a sweat when he watched Hosmer show how easy it was. Sabina, standing by him, had a tight grip on Yokum's arm. She turned her head and moaned.

But Hosmer made it.

Yokum made it, too. He took a second team across, and with somewhat less anxiety. Yet he was twitchy in the stomach, and shaky when he got down on the far side. He was too shaky even to resent Hosmer's knowing grin, and jovial, "Not bad, Ab! You're learning. Hold on, you won't puke."

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But one wagon did go over. For hours after Yokum heard the scream of the mules, the cry of the driver and the crash when the outfit landed on the rocks below. After that slip, Gilman, Hosmer and Yokum took turns until Jake Weems said, "My neck's no better'n yourn. I'm going."

When it was all done, Gilman gravely regarded Yokum. "Ab, you see now why I said the other day that I was glad you'd showed headwork? Virgil could have slipped, I could have. God alone knows what happened to make poor Brady go over. He was a good skinner."

There was nothing but harness to salvage; this the emigrants learned when they went afoot to the wreck. Instead of burying Brady, they heaped a cairn of rocks over him. Gilman got out his big Bible and read some lines.

"If a man die, shall he live again . . . days are few and full of trouble. . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Invite to Exile

THEY had almost whipped the shortcut when it demanded one more life: Gilman's. He died at the grade which the prospector had admitted to be steep. The rope with which they windlassed the wagons down the slope parted, letting a wagon run wild. All that Yokum could say to Sabina was, "It couldn't have been Hosmer, it had to be your dad!"

Sabina sat there, head bowed. She could not answer. There was nothing more for him to say. Awkwardly, he patted her on the shoulder, then drew away.

For a while, Yokum recaptured and held in his memory what Gilman had said after the first fatality. It was as though Gilman had had a premonition.

Glad I was showing some sense . . .

Something could happen to him, or to Hosmer . . . didn't say, happen to him and Hosmer . . . said it that way to keep from saying it meant him, and he wished anybody but Hosmer would take over . . .

Yokum rejected this reasoning. Gilman, liking and trusting Weems, could better have wished him to be next in command: and there were among the older men a few others who were level-headed. Yet it took more than a level head to lead a group; it took something which Gilman had lacked, for all his good sense and good heart.

Ab turned to Sabina. "Honey, I think I know now what your dad meant. He meant I should see you got to the river in case something happened to him."

She smiled through her tears; there was understanding in the smile.

"That's what he meant, Ab," she said softly.

It was not until later that he realized how curious it had been her giving him such an answer. Thinking further, he told himself that she must have shared his thoughts on who should take Hosmer's place as train captain. To get Sabina safely to the Hassayampa depended on everyone reaching the goal.

Many days' rations had been eaten during the delays. When the animals finally got back to open country, little grass was left. The trains which had left Fort Galer after the Gilman party had stuck to the advised route and had taken the lead. Those who followed had to go far afield to graze. Each morning's start had to be later. Each evening's halt had to be earlier. More men were needed to watch the scattered animals, and while no Indians were on the warpath, the invisible thieves were ever on the alert to take a horse, beeve or ox.

Men scrapped viciously over trifles. Instead of plodding along in column, the drivers fanned out to avoid swallowing dust. This cost time and energy. And, all the while, they came nearer the desert stretch when all their strength would be needed.

Whenever they halted, Hosmer found chores which kept Yokum away from Sabina. He made a point of having Breed, acting in the captain's name, do everything he could to ease the bereaved girl's hardships.

"Long as he's boss," Yokum told the girl, "I got to put up with it. But he's riding me, and I'll take him apart when the drive is over. Meanwhile, he's helping you get the best spot for starting in the morning."

"That's what I hate!" Sabina cried. "Trying to make me beholden to him."

Yokum grimaced. "Being fair-minded about it, he figures he's got to be extra good to you. He blames our hard luck on that fool prospector, but he can't argue

away the feeling that his notions led to your dad's accident."

"He wanted to lead—I hope he gets his fill of it!" she cried.

They were sitting on the removable steps which reached from ground to wagon bed. The sun had not yet set. Once more, weary animals and people had compelled an early halt. The distant peaks were rimmed as with fire. The colors changed mometarily, and so did the shadows. Cactus, towering forty feet, raised branches which made Yokum think of giants warning against invasion of land reserved for coyotes and rattlesnakes.

Yokum hitched himself toward her and said, "We'll get there, you and me. I ran away from my old man's farm. I called it a plugging and dreary sort of life, but I'm betting the next time I see pastures and water and alfalfa and a barn, I'll call it the promised land, for sure. I'll help you with what land you take up."

She said, "You can take up a section yourself, Ab, next to me."

She looked into the glowing haze as though she could see through it, and beyond the mountains, to the river itself, whose banks they had told her were fringed with cottonwoods.

"You just watch me!" he exclaimed happily.

BUT this was a pretense to cheer Sabina. More and more, the consequences of desertion worried him. In this thinly-populated new country, no business was private. Everyone was conspicuous. It was perfect for a man on the dodge, but the worst possible place for anyone who aimed to be tied to a farm. He fingered his chin. He hadn't a bad start on a beard.

Boots crunched. Sabina sat up and edged away a little, though they'd not been sitting as close together as they might have.

Virgil Hosmer came up. Breed, tall and lanky, dogged his heels. The man's grin made Yokum's temples throb. His voice was unsteady when he asked the boss, "What is it now?"

"Dean Gordon's team is alkalied. Go help him."

"The crowbaits are just falling apart of their hide wearing out!" Yokum flared.

"Do as I told you."

"Let him do it himself. He can shove bacon and chawing tobacco down their gullets as good as I can! Send that Hootnany of yours for a change!" Yokum's voice cracked. "You're riding me enough and, by God, I won't have it! You want an excuse to set around pestering Sabina, and she hates the sight of you, you loud-mouthed—"

Hosmer slapped him across the mouth. Yokum stared at the man a moment, then moved in with a right smash that knocked Hosmer cold. The big man doubled up and sprawled on the ground.

Cursing furiously, Breed closed on Yokum with his ox goad. Yokum, turning to confront Breed, caught a glimpse of men gathering around. He saw they were beginning to realize it was Hosmer who had been laid out.

Yokum ducked and grabbed a rock. The missile caught Breed in the chest. He dropped the goad, staggered and fell. He clipped his head against an outcropping ledge. Blood gushed from his nose and trickled from his ears.

Hosmer got to his knees and Jake Weems left the gathering emigrants to join Yokum. "He's had enough, Ab." Weems shouted. "He's hurt bad, busting his head on that rock!" He turned to give Hosmer a hand.

Hosmer thrust Weems aside, got up, stumbled around a moment before facing his men. "Take care of Breed," he said harshly.

Weems and Yokum backed away to the tail gate of Sabina's wagon. "Is he dead?" she asked.

Weems said, "It looks bad, Ab. You better keep out of sight so there won't be more trouble tonight."

"Trouble?" Sabina echoed, anxiously.

Weems drew a deep breath. "Everyone's cantankerous. None of us is right-minded as natural. There's fight in the air. Been a couple of flare-ups here and there in camp. No shouting, just nasty. Knife pullings, talking about guns."

Sabina turned to the wagon steps. "You stay in here, Ab. Jake, will you hustle us something to eat?"

Inside of the wagon, Yokum said, "Jake's afraid of what Hosmer'll make of this."

"What could he do?" the girl asked.

"I could get run out of camp afoot. The

by-laws are tough, and he still has friends."

"But that'd be murder, sending a man out alone."

"No one's quite hisself, honey. I'm not, and you aren't either. You looked at me in a way that meant, *give him another for me.*"

"But you wouldn't leave afoot. Take your choice of dad's saddle horses! Take his Winchester and pistols."

"His shotgun'd be handier for getting quail at a water hole of a morning," Yokum said. "Oh, they've not run me out yet! Got any stuff to start on before Jake brings cooked grub and coffee?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Wagon-Tongue Gallows

AN HOUR before dawn Weems came again to the wagon. "Breed's done for, and there's going to be trouble," he said slowly. "I'll get you one of Sabina's hosses and you ride. Be packing grub and stuff. I won't take long."

"Jake! You mean—" Sabina stopped short. "They're going to—"

"Looks bad," Weems said.

Yokum said, "Never mind the hoss. I'm not running."

"You could make it alone, somehow," Sabina whispered.

"That's not it," he said stubbornly.

"You think you ought to stick by me, because of dad?"

"It's for myself," Yokum answered. "Running out is what got me into this. I deserted from the cavalry. The discipline was tough. I got flogged once. I got tied to a gun carriage wheel over night account missing reveille. I signed up for it, and I should've took it. Keep your nose clean, and you don't catch hell. I didn't run out with good men, I went over the hill with stinkers, swindlers, thieves."

"That's past, Ab," the girl said hastily.

"Getting a growed-up man's ideas," Jake cut in, "is okay, but staying here to get hung from a wagon-tongue ain't allowing you time to use your growed-upness."

"You don't get it, Jake. Nor you, honey. I always said if Captain Slade's heart was cut out, it'd not be a meal for a kitten. He looked over a man or through a man, which riled me. He liked no man, and he hated no man. He had no friends and he had no enemies, and it made me feel like dirt. But that's the man this wagon train needs to get it through.

"Your dad didn't have hard enough a heart, and Hosmer hasn't enough head. No, I'm not running out. I'm sticking because I got to help Sabina. Because Hosmer hasn't got guts. He's just a lot of noise!"

"You're going to face damned riled-up men!" Weems snapped. "They're sore and tired, and hurting someone else will make them feel better for a while."

"I'm facing them the way that stinker of a Slade would have faced a whole troop if it'd a mutinied on parade. You stay away from me, account no one who's friendly to me when they come is going to be treated right by them."

"Ab!"

"Jake, this is my party!"

Weems quit the wagon.

For a long time, neither Yokum nor Sabina spoke. Finally, he said, "I've got to see this through. I got to use what I learned from Captain Slade before I went over the hill. I was too dumb to know I was learning things. A man that runs away from something he asked for is no good. I asked for the army, and I asked for this. Your dad asked for what he got—I couldn't say this to you unless I was willing to put my head on the block to prove it."

The dawn was not quite gray when they came for Yokum without awakening the women, or even all the men. The night guards had not begun bringing the livestock into the wagon inclosure, for what these men wanted was to do what they had come to do, and have it over.

"Ab," Sabina moaned, "they're here! It's too late! What'll you do? What *can* you do against them all?"

Six men carried among them three wagon-tongues to make a tripod: a gallows. In addition to the men approaching Sabina's wagon from the rear, Yokum heard the footfalls of those covering its front. Talking about facing these men as Slade would have, was one thing; doing it, another.

"Come out," a man called, softly to Yokum. "No use making noise."

"We got you covered," another said from behind a leveled Winchester. "Come

out quiet. This'll be over pretty damned quick."

Yokum obeyed. The power he had built up so resolutely seemed to trickle from his fingertips. The tightness of his throat kept him from shaping the words which were to have saved him. Though he thought he'd fall, he got down the steps. He wasn't sure whether he swayed, or whether the earth shivered beneath his feet.

Hosmer, in the middle of the closing half-circle, waited until Yokum had the steps behind him. Then he said, "Breed's dead. You killed him. You been a trouble-maker from the start. You fought law and order. We're going to make a damn good example of you."

Yokum loked at the tripod of wagon-tongues, the noose and a tall footstool on which he was to stand. For the first time, he understood that kindly farmers like his own father were capable of lynching.

He felt like a cornered animal. His eyes shifted, seeking an opening. He found several, but was afraid to bolt. His legs were wobbling, and though he shivered from morning chill sweat trickled down his face.

Things grew worse when Sabina came out of the wagon. It was worse than hanging, having her see him and hear him blow up. The first hint of sunrise, the sun he'd not look in the face again, made him want to plead, not for justice but for life—and this she must not hear.

In this extremity he found he could speak. "Sabina, go back. Get away. Get away. They are jumpy with their guns!"

His voice had not cracked. He sounded, in his own ears, as cold and remote as Captain Slade. New strength came to Yokum. Plead, be damned! He addressed Hosmer challengingly, "So I'm the example?"

"Is there something you want to say?" Hosmer asked coldly.

Some of the men fidgeted. Some stared at the ground.

He answered Hosmer, "Bear with me and I'll say it. Tie my feet so I won't kick around. Tie my hands so I can't grab for the rope. See that Sabina is well away before you yank the stool. I don't want her to see it."

HIS face was very tense, but he was able to smile a little. Yokum said slowly, "A fellow's eyes bug out, his tongue pokes out. It's not fitting for women to see. You ever been to a hanging?"

Hosmer didn't speak as steadily as before when he asked, "Is that all you've got to say?"

"Give me five minutes to say good-bye to Sabina, in her wagon. If I run, it'd save you a chore you don't like. I'd be running from a quick finish to a slow one. Five minutes isn't long. It'll give me a chance to look the sun in the face."

He turned his back on them. He didn't seem to breathe again until he set foot on the step leading to the wagon. He could barely climb. It had not occurred to him until too late that he had tempted them to shoot and settle it easily.

He swayed, caught himself on the wagon bow and lurched forward into the shadows to find Sabina. The laced canvas closed all but a little of the space between bow and wagon bed.

"Don't go away," he whispered as he caught her in his arms. "Scrunch down flat behind this stuff. Don't worry, honey. Don't worry! It'll be—it'll be—in case there's shooting stay down flat. There may be. I'm using your dad's gun!"

He held his hand over her mouth so she could not answer or protest. When her arms relaxed, he kissed her and twisted away. Then he made for the tail gate, keeping in the shadows of the wagon cover.

Yokum popped into view without warning. He had Gilman's shotgun leveled from his hip. "Buckshot," he said, as he started deliberately down the steps. "Both barrels. Don't move."

Hosmer had his watch in hand. He looked up at Yokum and his mouth fell open.

Yokum shouted suddenly, "Don't look to Hosmer. He can't save a one of you. I don't know whose guts I'll blow out, but I'm giving both barrels. You can all shoot at once, but my dead fingers'll yank both barrels!"

A man started, dropped his pistol.

Yokum held his gun steady.

Hosmer said harshly, "We've got you covered."

"Come get me! Come hang me!"

The twelve-gauge muzzles shifted slowly over the group. Yokum repeated the challenge, "Come get me! Come hang me!"

Hosmer was pale, sweating.

Yokum said, "I won't miss you, Virgil. No, not *you*."

A man stuttered, "Let him go. It ain't worth being shot up for."

Another said, "Take a hoss and get out!"

Yokum stood fast. "I stay till I drop, and I drop firing. Either come and get me, or else!" He took a step forward. "Put those guns down before I fire. Once I can't stand watching you all, I'm closing my eyes and cutting loose!"

That settled it. Slowly, each man dropped his weapon.

From the flank, Jake Weems came up with a twelve-gauge Parker. "He's got you, Virgil. You ain't got the guts, none of you. He has. Ab, what do you want 'em to do?"

"You, Virgil, one step forward. *March*!"

Hosmer obeyed.

"Turn around and tell them you resign, on account of I have elected myself captain."

Hosmer faced about and said, "Yokum is captain in my place."

"Jake, whilst I got them covered, wake up the camp. You—all of you—back up slow and keep bunched tight. Sabina, when I'm in front of all the guns on the ground, pick 'em up and put 'em in the wagon."

He herded Hosmer and his men back. They moved like sleep-walkers. They didn't halt until he stopped, and Sabina began collecting the weapons. Jake, having given a call to arouse camp, returned to join Yokum.

The others, not party to Hosmer's plan, were still groggy from sleep. They stopped well short of the group bunched up before the scatter gun. What they saw gave meaning to Weems' words.

Yokum explained, "Virgil aimed to hang me afore you men woke up. He knew the majority of you'd not stand for a thing like this. That shows he's not fitting to be captain. So I'm taking command. I took it from twenty men with guns, and I'm keeping it."

He handed Weems the shotgun. "Now that the men Virgil didn't trust to let him hang me are here, I don't need this. I got all the backing I need. We're going to roll, and we're going to the river, because I'm taking you to it. Get to your chores!"

He turned. Jake Weems trailed along with the weapons. "Ab, you got 'em euchered!" Weems said, grinning widely.

"Sure I have." He sighed gustily, staggered a step and pulled himself together. He was weary, ready to fall apart. "That was tough as hanging. Only it didn't take as long."

"You mean to tell me you knew they'd knuckle down?"

"Or else I'd be buzzard bait, which is what I feel like. Didn't know which, still don't know. Won't know till we see the elephant. But with a bit of brass, and a lot of prayer, there's a chance."

CHAPTER SIX

Cholera

YOKUM knew that he could not long depend on the shock of his having turned on his executioners. He realized also that even though the older heads who had elected Gilman outnumbered Hosmer's clique, mere numbers had failed Gilman, and could fail again. So, in the short while during which he was still firm in the saddle, Yokum sought a long term source of power; power to keep these people working together instead of wrangling until they perished a few at a time.

He thought of those much hated officers, Colonel Fitch and Captain Slade. The former, commanding a thousand men, rarely spoke in their presence. The latter, commanding more than a hundred, had little to say, except to the sergeants. This little, it seemed, was mainly spoken out of hearing of the rank and file. They didn't actually rule by threat of punishment but by will. And when this came to Yokum, it was as though he had been struck by lightning.

"The shotgun was just something they could see to make them understand what they felt," he told himself. "What got them in line was because I had more will power than the bunch of them put together. Wasn't my gun against theirs, it was me against them."

He wasn't going to try to make an appearance like Captain Slade. He'd merely use the principles of command. And the first of these was to detail each of Seth Gilman's steadiest supporters to keep an eye on a certain portion of the party.

"I can't, and nobody else can keep an eye on this big a string of men and ani-

mals," he told them. "But each of you can boss four wagons and see that nobody and nothing gets out of line. You're going to see to it that your bunch is ready to roll on time. Those that can't keep up, they've got to dump enough things out so their teams can move fast enough."

A man asked, "You aim to run it like an army?"

"I aim to run it like something that gets to where it's going. Like the freighters on the Santa Fe trail; they don't pay attention to what one likes or another don't like. They bear down on moving along and not losing men or animals or cargo."

With the collapse of poorly-built vehicles, necessary goods were distributed among the remaining wagons. Dressers, chiffoniers, dining room tables, rocking chairs and stoves were abandoned. They beefed the slow moving oxen and pushed on with the faster mules, each day covering ten more miles than they had been doing. By pooling the contents of half-emptied barrels of meal and flour, they won spare barrels for hauling water.

Jake Weems said, one evening, "Ah, it's working, but they'll never forgive you for heaving away bedsteads and what-nots and pianos and melodeons and dishes and stuff."

"Don't make any difference what they think. If any of them could think, I'd not be running the show."

He wasn't cocky about it; he merely realized that he'd quit being a man and, instead, had become a law. They hated him, but they obeyed because one law was better than twenty different notions. The worst of it was that he'd lost touch with Sabina.

He couldn't forget the look with which she had regarded him after she'd abandoned half a wagon load of her most precious possessions. He'd rather have taken a whipping than have that walnut sideboard left beside the trail; it had belonged to Sabina's grandmother, and Sabina's father had got it as a wedding present. And the gate-leg table and the fan-back chairs . . . they'd come from England maybe a hundred years before.

If she'd come at him crying and screaming and calling him names, he could have counted on her getting over it; but she had just looked at him as though he wasn't human.

Though he didn't realize it, he began looking through and beyond people. The only ones who had a thing to say to him were Seth Gilman's old friends. They talked only when they had something to say. They put up with him because his job was one they wouldn't want. They all wanted to be liked by their fellows, just as did Hosmer.

"But I'm getting them there," Yokum told himself, mile after dusty mile. "Seth Gilman told me to, and I am."

Each time he passed the grave of some earlier emigrant, he bucked himself up in his aloneness by saying. "None of mine have been planted; they're moving fast enough for the grub to last."

The graves became more numerous. There were abandoned wagons, good ones which should have kept rolling. It looked as though whole families of those who had stuck to the main trail had died off.

YOKUM didn't suspect the truth until cholera broke out. A driver, doubled up with cramps, fell from his wagon. Though he landed clear of the wheels, his escape from death was postponed only a few hours. Another, taken sick at the noon halt, was as good as dead when they made camp that evening. Fatigue, and a diet which kept them on the verge of scurvy, had made them easy victims of tainted water-holes and the contamination of shallow graves.

"That damned Hosmer and his short cut," Yokum told himself. "Set us back so people packing cholera got ahead and fouled things up."

When panic and helplessness drove the emigrants to him, to demand that he do something. Yokum knew better than to blame someone else.

"Get out your medicine chests. It's cholera, all right, and let's see what the doctor book says."

"If we haven't thrown it away with everything else," someone retorted bitterly.

There were cholera pills; just one brown bottle of them in the entire train. Even as the emigrants gathered in a half circle began to sway, began to make the first move to close in, each to grab for the medicine, a woman collapsed. All but one of the tightening line broke away in horror. That one man knelt beside her, stroked her hair,

cried out; and then he lunged for Yokum, yelling, "Gimme that medicine! She's got to have some!"

Those who had recoiled from contagion now checked themselves. That one man's rush whipped up their greed and fear. In another instant there'd be a stampede. He'd be trampled, clawed, booted. The bottle would be smashed and the medicine scattered. If this happened, he was finished as a leader. A man charged at Yokum.

"Stop him, Jake," the captain said quietly.

Weems took a long stride. As he moved, he drew his pistol and clipped the man alongside the head, dropping him in the dust. Yokum said, "You don't grab. You get what the book says."

That checked those who would have rushed him. Had he lifted his own hand against the maddened man, it would have been Yokum's finish as a leader. He beckoned to Sabina. "Give me a hand with this woman. The rest of you, take it easy. When these pills are gone, we can fix something that's mighty good. It says here that you mix camphor and laudanum and cayenne pepper, which is what is in these pills. Get busy finding those things; you're bound to have some of each."

When the patient had been tended to, Sabina went with Yokum to doctor others who had been taken sick. She stayed calm and cheery as though dealing with kids.

As they went through the darkness between one camp fire and the next, Yokum stopped and drew Sabina toward him. "I couldn't help it, throwing out your furniture. No matter how much you look at me like I'm a varmint, I'd have to do it all over again."

"I know you had to," she answered. "That isn't why I looked at you that way. It was because you'd become bigger than yourself, big enough to do the job neither dad nor Virgil could do."

She perched her medicine tray on her hip to rest her arms. She shifted her weight, which brought her closer to Yokum. Her eyes widened, and despite her weariness she looked lovely. Their lips almost met when Yokum drew back.

"I'm not supposed to be human," he said quickly. "They're watching me every step; I can feel their eyes."

"We'll have our time when all this is over," she whispered, and went with him to the next group.

Some of the first to be taken sick survived the crisis. These, like the ones stricken during the days which followed, had to lie on pallets in the wagons. Soon there would be no room for the convalescents, and for the supplies which the company needed for the rest of the trip. Worst of all, the medicine wouldn't last much longer.

The sodbusters who had carried out Yokum's orders came to tell him that a bad situation was becoming worse. "Wasn't much laudanum to start with, just some for deadening toothaches and such-like. Nobody expected to need much camphor, excepting a bit in case someone got sick to the stomach."

They looked at Yokum as though they expected him to dig drugs out of the desert. Another said, "Them that aren't sick are scared silly. Soon they'll be sneaking out of camp to make a run for it alone. They'll kill their teams trying it. They'll leave us stuck and helpless, and not do their selves any good."

Yokum answered, "There isn't any such thing as *their* teams or *their* anything else. This is one outfit, understand?"

"Could make a camp for the sick and let the rest hurry ahead for help afore the grass gives out," another proposed.

"That's just what you men are to stop. Once we start breaking up, Indians or renegades will pick us off, one at a time. Someone's got to go for help. If there's no help at the river settlement, there's an army post. They got medicine, and there's a chance of getting vittles that the sick can get well on. No wagon can travel fast enough, but a man on a horse can make it."

He looked each man in the eye. When he had scanned each haggard face, he asked, "Who's going to carry word? Seth Gilman's hoss can cover the ground fast."

There was no answer. Each expected someone else to volunteer. Yokum went on, "Two of you go. His second hoss is mighty good."

"It's this way, Ab. We got families. We don't know what'll happen whilst we're gone. If something happens, we want to be here. If only to bury them decently."

Another chimed in as he turned his palms up for all to see, "I got callouses

from digging graves for other men's families. Who's going to take care of mine?"

A third brought things to a head: "We've caught onto how to boss an outfit. You got no family. You ride for help."

Yokum looked out across the desert, at the mountains which would soon bar the way. "Hearing you put it the way you did, I'll go."

Jake Weems took a step forward. "How about me? Two of us'll have twice the chance of one."

"You'll do to take along, Jake," Yokum answered. Later, when the others had gone, he said, "I was sure in a sweat, trying to get them to ask me to go. If they'd thought I wanted to ride out, those men that've been backing me would've quit cold."

"Suppose you got to go to the army post, and they arrest you?"

Yokum chuckled. "I'll let you talk while I keep out of sight."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Return of a Deserter

WHEN Yokum had the desert behind him, and came finally within sight of the cottonwoods fringing the river, and the stretches of alfalfa, he said to Weems, "That's the greenest green I ever saw in my life. It looks like all the green in the world has been stuffed into every irrigated field."

Their lips were cracked from the wind which blew across the waste. Their eyes were bloodshot; but the distant verdure offered relief. The weary horses perked up; so did the riders.

It wasn't until they came to the nearest homestead that Yokum learned that a rescue party would be difficult to organize. The adobe farmhouse was deserted. Each room was littered with broken and overturned furniture. Featherbeds had been slashed open, leaving the floors ankle deep in down. Yellow-jackets buzzed about the picked bones of an ox. Another, riddled with arrows, would soon be buzzard-bait.

"With Indians raising hell," Yokum said finally, "the army is busy. They can't fool around helping a crowd of sodbusters. And the folks we left are too played out to keep their eyes open. They'll be easy pickings. They'll be damned easy pickings!"

They stepped into the adobe stable and counted the stalls.

"Four mules, two hosses gone," Jake decided, after looking at the hoofprints.

They rode up the river, toward Fort Klassen. Each farm they passed was deserted. However, there were neither bodies nor carcasses. As nearly as Yokum could decide, a massacre, miles down-stream, had warned those nearer the fort. Toward evening, they came to Klassenburg, a sprawl of false-front stores near the fort. It would become a town when the railroad branched out from Phoenix. Until then, it was only a trading post to serve miners and sodbusters and cattlemen of the valley.

What medicine there was in the general store, Yokum bought. When this was done, he said to Weems, "So far it's been easy. The tough part of it is getting folks to risk their necks hauling out food fit for those poor devils to eat."

Weems fingered his chin. "With most of the troops turned out, it's no wonder everyone is scairt silly here. Looks like we have to talk to the post commander. Couple army wagons and maybe a dozen or so soldiers'd do the job."

"Depends on how bad the trouble is. Let's get going."

Weems shook his head. "I'll go. You might get into a peck of trouble."

"Makes me feel sneaking, not doing my job."

"Having you picked up won't help the folks back there, Ab. When they do get help, they still got to muddle their way back. You can't figure troops will take over and do it for them. The best we can expect is proper vittles going under army guard."

"Do it that way, Jake."

Yokum sat down under a cottonwood tree and watched Weems ride to the fort. Its bastions were pierced with loopholes so musketry could command each face of the square inclosure. He looked up at the flag and around at the cultivated country, and felt lonelier than ever before in his life. A deserter lost his citizenship. He no longer rated a stake in homestead like other people did. He'd have to change his name and stay far from this outpost.

Finding his thoughts poor company, he went to the livery stable to hire a buckboard to which he and Jake could hitch

their own mounts; but the proprietor wouldn't risk even the vehicle. Yokum had scarcely chalked up his failure when he saw Weems returning. It was clear even from a distance that Weems had got a bad answer.

When they came face to face, he said, "I talked to the commanding officer himself, and the son said he had his hands full chasing a band of hostiles without playing quartermaster for emigrants. They'll have to eat beans and slamjohns and thank God it they don't get their hair lifted. Lucky *you* didn't go."

"How come?"

"The officer is that buzzard you hate the guts of, that glassy-eyed Slade that looks at people like they were dirt. Huh! And he's a major now."

"Major Slade," Yokum said slowly. "Major Slade." He mounted. "He can throw me in the guardhouse and the hell with him. I'm telling him myself!"

"Ah, you're crazy!"

"No, I am not. In case I get jugged—good lord, Jake, it won't be much worse for you going back alone to warn the folks than if there's two of us together."

"What'll you say that I didn't say?"

"I'm telling him that when a deserter turns in to get a chance to say help is needed, it must be needed badly. You spread the word around town what I did. It'll make the civilians raise the roof until he has to do something. We're getting help if I spend the next five years in the guard house."

YOKUM rode to the gate of the fort. The sentries passed him without challenge or curious look. He dismounted at headquarters building, where an orderly with white gloves paced mechanically from one end of the veranda to the other, made a mechanical about-face, and paced back again.

Yokum paused as though to glance at the bulletin board. He was getting up his nerve. He had to look right and sound right, which would be hard, for he was dog tired, dirty and thick-lipped from alkali dust.

What he saw was no surprise, yet the order tacked to the board was written in words which told him, more clearly than he had ever realized, how he stood, and where.

Abner John Yokum, coward and deserter. . . .

The old-fashioned language of court-martial procedure was here at its stilted, formal best: all men were enjoined against harboring him or failing to surrender him. He remembered facing Hosmer and twenty other armed men, and read again, *coward and deserter.* Barnes and Short and Wallace were listed. They had not been picked up.

A sergeant admitted Yokum to Major Slade's office. The major got up. He was thin-cheeked and deeply tanned; his mouth was straight and tight, his eyes unwavering. It was a disciplined face, one responding only to command. This time, he did not look through or beyond Yokum, but at him—at the dirt, at the soot-smeared lids, at the tattered clothes.

While the scrutiny could not have been longer than a few seconds, it seemed an eternity to Yokum. The only sound was the scratching of a clerk's pen and the measured beat of the orderly's feet on the veranda. That even tread gave him his cue.

"Major Slade, you sent my man away, so I've come to talk turkey. I've come to ask how come you rate a man in full dress in front of your office, decorating the place, when people just as good as you are dying for lack of fitting food? I come to ask how many troops this half-pint settlement needs to guard it. Every man-jack of 'em can high-tail into this fort. I come to ask how come you can't spare even one of all those escort wagons in the park, and a—"

Major Slade's eyes became almost human and his mouth loosened. "Your man didn't put it quite that way. He did make it clear where the emigrant party was. I'll send supplies under guard. Go tell your people we'll be on the way as quickly as possible. Sergeant, publish an order."

He sat down, picked up his pen and resumed signing papers. The sergeant came to Yokum and said courteously, "You can consider it taken care of. You won't have to wait and guide us."

He went with Yokum to the door. Yokum, still not understanding how he had dodged recognition and arrest, rode back to meet Weems.

"You done it?" Weems exclaimed. "You mean you done it?"

"I might've changed so much he'd not

recognized me. Even if I looked familiar, he'd never figure a deserter'd run such a risk. I can understand all that. What I can't understand is how he came across without even me finishing giving him hell. Jake, I got an itch to ride. Can you go it?"

"Afraid he'll change his mind?" Weems asked.

"Afraid of what's waiting for us yonder."

They rode, the sinking sun spearing them between the shoulders. Yokum said, "Indians hardly ever do more than steal hosses or beef critters at night. Long as we don't lose our hair at sun-up, we got a good chance."

When they broke camp the following morning they were still wearing their hair; they shared the desert only with road-runners and quail and the dust spirals which wheeled and countermarched to make Yokum think of cavalry at maneuvers. Ever since his facing Major Slade he'd been thinking of cavalry and of the three with whom he'd gone over the hill.

Impatiently, Yokum looked back for escort wagons' dust, which he could not hope to see. Ahead, the wheel-rutted trail reached into the mountains. He squinted into the glare and the shifting shadows for the first sight of the emigrant wagons which could not yet be creaking into the eastern mouth of the pass. He spent a lot of time telling himself that the Indians who had devastated and terrorized the farms of the Hassayampa Valley would not have ranged so far east, and that if they had, the cavalry patrols from Fort Klassen would have given them something to think of before now.

"Probably just a handful of young bucks on a drunk," Yokum mumbled for the hundredth time since the start.

Jake answered, "Quit thinking about it, or the heat'll get you!"

That night the mountains seemed hardly any nearer. On the succeeding day, mirage and dancing air made then seem farther away than ever. Far to his right front, Yokum spotted a flash, as of a mirror reflecting the sun. Weems, watching, saw the next flicker.

"Heliograph," Yokum decided. "Troops way off, maybe thirty-forty miles. Let's see where they get answers from."

Both studied the horizon and the mountains. Neither saw any more of the intermittent flashing. After trying to spit, Weems remarked, "Bad guess, Ab."

"Maybe so, though you've got to be exactly in line, station to station, or you can't get heliograph. What we saw might've been accidental flashes whilst they were setting up the instruments."

A LONG, unbroken ascent led to the summit of the pass. Impatiently, Yokum pressed on. Finally reaching the saddle between the barren peaks, he dismounted to rest his horse while he and Weems looked down over the succession of lower ridges. Eagerly he scanned each intervening dip. While there were "blind" spaces on the farther slope of each ridge, rising dust would reveal a hidden wagon train.

He saw no such sign; and the plain beyond was too far away for wagons to be visible. Hopefully, Yokum said, "We're still quite a piece from where they'd be starting to come up into the pass, and the wind would be thinning the dust afore it'd rise high enough for us to see it."

"Maybe they're near'n we think," Weems said.

That each was bucking up the other's hopes was no secret; but they kept up their pretense as they began the descent.

They camped that night by a spring. Water and good grass refreshed the horses. Eagerness, keeping Yokum from sleep, made him insist on setting out well before dawn. He had to get to the next ridge, the one which kept him from getting an unbroken view of the trail ahead. Two hours after sunrise they reached the goal; and on the plain they saw their reward.

An orderly column of wagons lumbered out of the flats. The first was near the foot of the ascent. Dust kept him from counting them, yet the length of the procession seemed to be as he had last seen it; there had not been many losses.

He blinked and twisted in the saddle, but averted his head a little before saying in a choked voice, "I could hoot and holler and sing—I could damn near pray!"

Weems grunted, reached for his bandanna-end to rub something from his eye, and both stared straight ahead. Below them was a rocky ridge dotted with ocatilla clusters. The thorny stems, each topped by scarlet

flowers, swayed like serpents listening to a charmer's flute. Clumps of yucca, flowering white, marked the deep cleft through the ridge.

Then Yokum's glance shifted. He went cold and his throat tightened. He no longer wanted to sing or holler, but he was more than ready to pray. He groaned, "Look at that devil over yonder!"

A man had popped up from the ridge. He stood silhouetted against the eastern sky. To Yokum, no details were visible, yet the shape itself was more than enough. There was no mistaking the Apache head dress, the boot-moccasins with the turned-down tops. The Indian ducked from the skyline to dart among the rocks. Weems leveled his Winchester. Yokum caught his arm.

"Wait! Look! Down there!"

Other Apaches were worming their way from the observation level to the cleft where they would lurk in ambush. It was already clear that some would fire from the cover of boulders beside the trail; that others, perched on the steep wall, would fire down. Rather than attack in the open, where the wagons could, with luck and speed, be formed in a square, they wanted to catch them in the pass.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Apache Strike

TWO emigrants left the head of the column to ride out ahead.

"Maybe they saw something," Yokum said. "Going to look into it."

"Not the way they're riding. They're just going to look over the lay of the land."

"One of 'em sits his hoss like Hosmer."

"Virgil, all right. But he can't see the Indians from the road. We can hardly pick them from above."

There was only one thing to do, and it had to be done quickly. Yokum and Weems looked to their guns. They mounted.

"Jake, we better divide this medicine. Half's better than none."

This took only a moment. Then Yokum added, "Let me get a good start. I'll raise all the hell I can, and you ride through. No matter what happens, you keep going and tell them to get those wagons in a square. Tell them—"

But there was nothing left to say. Yokum broke from cover and booted his mount down the grade. Hoofs clattered against the rocks. His wild yell echoed in the cleft. Behind him, and too close on his heels, Weems pounded along, howling and shooting.

The two who had ridden in advance of the wagon train pulled up with a jerk. No doubt now that the tall one was Hosmer; the way he sat his horse and the way he gestured made that plain to Yokum.

Instead of racing back to the wagons, Hosmer and his companion let out a whoop and charged for the pass. They fired as they rode. Yokum, knowing that no man could make himself heard above the uproar, nevertheless shouted, "Get back! Get back!"

Then he began to understand: Hosmer, like all the others, had been counting on relief. He must have mistaken the shots and the yelling for an expression of triumph. Whatever anyone else might have done, Hosmer would have to ride up, then race back to give word rather than let Yokum steal the show.

Then Yokum took the ambush from the rear. Rifles blazed above him. Bullets whined and screeched. Smoke blossomed from the upper ledges. He held his fire until he came upon the Apaches among the rocks at the mouth of the cleft. They scrambled about, forgetting the emigrants, and turned to face what had come up from behind them.

Yokum cut loose with his six-shooter. He poured lead into a milling cluster of braves. He got a glimpse of their ponies, some yards back in a wash. A wild slug made the animals squeal and snort. Several broke their hobbles and bolted.

Hosmer was near enough now to know what was going on, but he pounded along, blazing away at the enemy. His teeth showed in a reckless grin. Yokum got that final flash before his own horse stumbled, recovered, then broke stride and fell.

Yokum rolled among rocks instead of smashing himself against them. The inch-long ocatilla thorns needled him. His horse recovered enough to lurch afoul of Weems' mount. The two animals went down in a kicking heap. Someone, his horse wholly out of hand, clattered up the pass. Stampeding ponies hurdled boulders and started rock slides.

"Grab your Winchester!" Yokum howled as Weems kicked loose from his stunned animal. "Here they come!"

And now he saw that the raiders weren't Apaches at all, but white renegades covering their dirty work by wearing Indian gear. Yokum, crouching behind a rock, emptied his Colt. He snatched the carbine from the saddle boot, which had been torn loose in the spill. Then, through smoke and dust, he saw what he might have become had he not broken away from the three with whom he had gone over the hill.

There was Barnes, the man he had once clipped alongside the head. With him was Short, fumbling a Sharp's carbine. Both looked stupid and dazed by the inverted ambush. Whether wounded in the fracas, or knocked down by their crazed horses, both were bleeding and wobbly.

"Meet the cavalry!" Yokum shouted as they saw him, recognized him and raised their weapons.

He fired first. Short doubled up, falling across his gun. Barnes blazed away. Yokum felt the burn of lead along his ribs as he flipped the lever. He fired from the hip.

Behind him, Weems shouted, "Got the son!" and cut loose a shot.

What settled the melee was the approach of other riders from the wagon train. The renegades wanted no truck with men ready for trouble. Already, several .45-70's were coughing at those who had recaptured their horses and were mounting up.

Weems spat out a broken tooth and said thickly, "I'm leaking all over, but I don't know if it's rocks or bullets."

Hosmer, badly riddled, was trying to sit up. One of the newly-arrived sodbusters offered him a drink of water. He lasted until they got him to the wagons, and Sabina set to work doctoring his wounds. He turned his old-time smile on the men and women who flocked around.

"I knew I could save you folks," he began.

Then he choked, cried out, and slumped back against the wadded coat that had supported his head. After a moment, Yokum said, "Virgil sure went in a-shooting, and he didn't hold his hoss."

From a great distance came the sound of a bugle.

Someone said bitterly, "The army's always on the job when the job's all done."

Yokum turned on the speaker. "They've been hunting those varmints for days, and you didn't see 'em looking right at 'em!"

The epidemic, he learned, had burned itself out. However, his ride had not been wasted, since without the grub that was on the way at least half the convalescents in the wagons would surely die before they came to civilization.

A DETACHMENT of cavalry came down the pass. When the troops spread out to round up stray horses and pick up raiders whose wounds had kept them from making a get-away, the officer in command rode toward the halted wagon train.

Yokum recognized Major Slade and said to Sabina, "He must've followed me and Jake to see if things were as bad as I told him they were. On the way he joined up with one of the patrols he'd sent out to nail the hostiles."

"Do you have to talk to him?" she demanded anxiously.

"He didn't recognize me at Klasen."

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of Star Western, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1947. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Star Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of October, 1947. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40, Register's No. 363-W-8. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Rev. 7-46.

"But he will, if he has enough dealings with you. That beard won't fool him forever."

Yokum said, "I could make out like I got shot up, and put on some bandages."

Sabina won new life, new hope. "Darling, you've always got a way out." She caught his arm. "Let's get to work. Jake, you go to meet them and—"

Yokum cut in, "Hold it, Jake! I'm going to meet the major myself." He paused, eyed them both and licked his lips. "I'm surrendering. Whatever they do to me, it won't last forever, and then I can take up land and live like a man. I ran away from a farm once, but after crossing all this desert I got a new idea on life. Your dad and all these other men, what's left of them, came out here to build up a new country, and I'm going to get myself the right to team up with them. And with you, too, if you've got the patience to wait for a deserter."

"Ab, do you have to do it that way?"

"I got to."

He turned to his horse and mounted up. "You stay here, Jake. This is my show."

He trotted out to meet Major Slade. The officer spoke to the non-com and orderly who followed him. They halted and watched their chief ride on.

When the two horses were almost head to head, Yokum said, "Sir, Private Abner Yokum reports for duty after—I forget how many days A.W.O.L."

Slade's disciplined face did not change. He said, "Supplies are on the way, as fast as the wagons can roll. You did well, taking those renegades from the rear."

"How'd you know about their being hit from behind?"

"A few were still able to talk."

Yokum gulped. He sat there like a dummy. As the silence stretched, he groped for a fresh start. "Sir, I am reporting—"

"I heard you the first time, Yokum. I recognized you at Fort Klassen."

"And you didn't put me under arrest?"

"I knew that unless things were in bad shape, you'd never have risked talking to me after your man had failed. I didn't want to recognize you. I'm damned if I know why you insist now!"

"I want to take my medicine and be returned to duty." He gestured. "Account of some people back there, people I like a lot."

"Quit stuttering, Yokum. You are doubtless referring to one person, a young lady. Right?"

"Yes, sir. But that's not all of it. In the pass, I tangled with two of the men I went over the hill with. Barnes and Short. I shot it out with them. Seeing the dirty work they got mixed up in, there's nothing I want to do except quit being a damned deserter."

"You know that you'll face a court-martial?" Slade asked. "This can't be settled by anything as simple as company punishment."

"I know that, sir. But a man gets credit for turning himself in instead of being picked up."

Slade nodded. "The court will consider every favorable circumstance." Once more he came very near looking as human as other people. "I shall convene a court at Fort Klassen. I see no good reason for sending you all the way back to Fort Galer, where Colonel Fitch would handle the matter."

His voice told Yokum that this was a promise, and not a threat. Yokum asked, "What do you suppose I'll get?"

"The least the law allows. And when you are restored to duty, you can get a discharge by purchase. Let your friend claim the bounty for taking Barnes and Short. If you can't raise the rest some way or other, you deserve to serve the rest of your enlistment. Take charge of your wagons and when they're safe at Klassenburg, report to me at headquarters, under arrest. That's all!"

He wheeled his horse.

Yokum, being under arrest, did not salute. He rode back to the wagons, where Sabina was waiting. She clung to Jake's arm.

"Oh, good Lord, I was afraid they'd take you away and not even let you say goodbye to me!" she cried, and caught him with both arms. "What happened? How did you do it? Didn't he—didn't you—"

Yokum brushed back her sunbonnet and kissed her.

"I'm as good as in the clear already, honey. You see that hill ahead of us? It's the last hill I'm going over. It's the last one any of us are going over."

THE END

Brady and His Loco Locomotive

By Jeb Ford

PROBABLY the hottest, dustiest route ever laid out for a railroad train was the so-called "bleached bones" run from Badwater to Cadiz. No one would make that trip more than once a month—the railroad company was forced to alternate its crews. Its only steady trainman was big, red-bearded Mike Brady, an engineer who stuck with the line not because he liked the desert—he hated it—but because he had a girl at the last stop.

Unfortunately for the passengers who had business along the way, the romance of Brady and his slender, fiery-tempered sweetheart, Ellie Small, never did run smooth. They quarreled at least once a month, parting forever and swearing passionately that neither would ever speak to the other again. On those days, the train simply did not run.

"What's the use?" Big Mike would say, folding his arms stubbornly, deaf to the pleas of the railway agent. "I got no interest in goin' there." It is a matter of fact that the railroad involved, which shall be nameless, having long passed the stage where it cares to be reminded of its bohemian youth, often acted as the mediator in these devastating lovers' quarrels and once went so far as to ship their engineer a red silk scarf with an attached card reading "I didn't really mean it, Ellie."

No corporation, however, is in business for its health or even for its amusement. There may have been some reluctant chuckles among the gray-bearded executives when Mike ran away with Engine No. 34 and three passenger cars, but of course that sort of thing couldn't be tolerated.

It all started when Ellie appeared defiantly at a schoolhouse dance with a new cattle hand. Word got back to Mike and he was fit to be roped and throwed. To everyone's surprise, he agreed to make the run. "I'll show her!" he snorted as he swung up into the cab. Dark was falling as the train rolled forward. The passengers nodded and went to sleep. Apparently, none of them noticed the change in the atmosphere and if anyone felt a sudden chill they merely shivered a little and mumbled about the sharpness of the desert air.

Meanwhile, the railroad was in a tizzy of excitement. Mike Brady had whizzed past Ellie Small's trackside cabin with a "see-if-I care" toot, then stopping, switched his train onto a section that headed north. Stupefied trainmen pulled switches as the engine thundered down the tracks. Mike disregarded flags, lanterns, bonfires, and raced along a little used spur, disappearing into the mountains about two o'clock in the morning.

From there on, the railroad world lost Engine No. 34 and all its shivering human freight. How it got to Albuquerque, no one aboard ever knew, except Big Mike, who took her there, and he would never tell. In fact, he never made a satisfactory explanation of the whole thing. All he would say, as he watched his half-starved, kidnapped passengers crawling from their seats, was, "Durn woman! She made me mad, she did!"

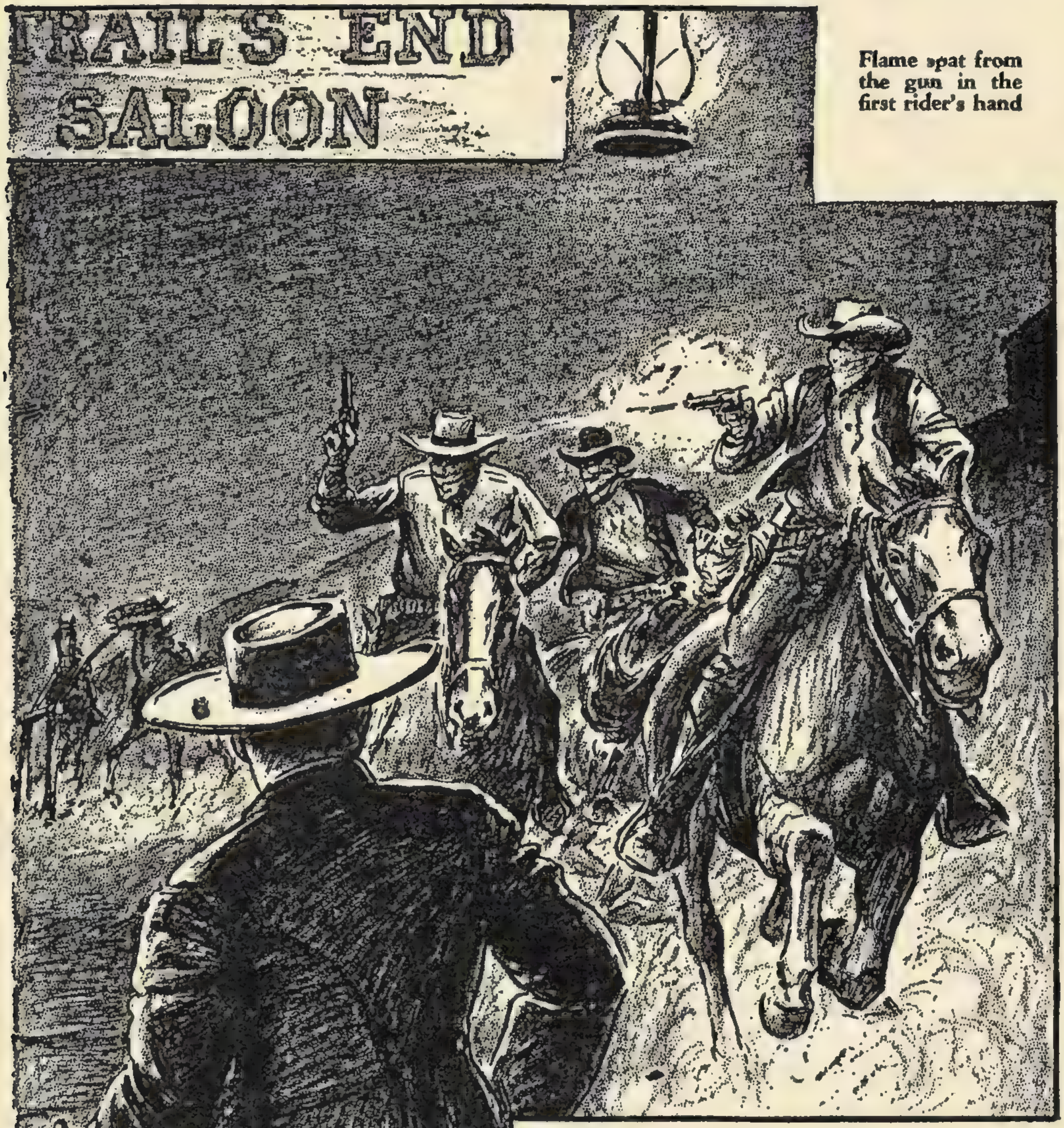
He understood Ellie, though. He proved it a few weeks later when she meekly marched down the middle aisle, her face shining with pride at being the bride of a man who could make a whole train disappear just for her love. By that time, of course, Mike was no longer in the railroad business—he was teaching school. Geography, I believe.

THERE'S BLOOD ON

Golden Billy Smith, Marshal of Clover City, backed the law with a soft voice and a loud Colt, until a bust-head boom-town honky-tonk bouncer tried to prove that two hard fists could beat two fast guns!

HIS STAR!

By William Heuman



Flame spat from the gun in the first rider's hand

CHAPTER ONE

New Tinhorn for Clover City

ALTHOUGH it was two hours after sunset the hammers were still going across the road, a steady banging intermingled with the rasp of saws. Bonfires had been lighted in the street to illuminate the half-completed two-story structure;

flares sizzled and hissed at various corners, providing the carpenters light with which to work on into the night.

Sam McQuade, floorman in the Trail's End Saloon and Gambling House, leaned on the bar where it curved in toward the wall, a sandwich in one big, heavy-knuckled hand, a glass of beer in the other, a scowl on his wide, battered face as he listened to the hammers.

Head bartender Lou Dunlap came over, swishing the bar with his rag, a fat man with thin brownish hair. He said disgustedly, "Damned hammerin' drives a man crazy, Sam."

Sam McQuade took another vicious bite into the sandwich, worked on the food with his heavy jaws for a few moments, then gulped down the rest of his beer. He looked down along the bar. Jack Saxon's four bartenders were in their places, ready for work even though the big room was only partially filled.

Blaisdell, the faro dealer, was at his table, a tall, lean, dark man, immaculately dressed, staring down at his green table thoughtfully, waiting for the night's work to begin. The gambler glanced toward the bar, met Sam McQuade's pale blue eyes and smiled wanly.

Sam wiped his lips with the back of his coat sleeve, shook his head at Blaisdell and pushed away from the bar, a big man, over six feet tall, two hundred pounds, his broad shoulders threatening to burst the seams of his short, black jacket. He wore a brown derby hat set well back on his head in approved bouncer fashion.

Moving between the empty card tables, Sam paused in front of Blaisdell's spread for a few moments. He said grimly, "They'll have the damned thing finished before the end of the week. Glutmann will be ready to open when the first trail herd from Texas comes over the horizon."

Blaisdell nodded, his face expressionless. "Tough on Jack," he said.

Sam McQuade's frown deepened. He stood there with his hands thrust in his trouser pockets, rocking gently on the soles and heels of his square-tipped shoes. Over at the piano the Professor was warming up easily, playing snatches of classical music as he always did before the main crowd swarmed in, before the Texas trail riders roared in, demanding *Dixie*, and only *Dixie*.

This was a night like any other night, with the establishment primed for business, but it was different. It was different because Glutmann, from 'Frisco's Barbary Coast, was finishing up his gigantic Empire House, biggest gambling establishment in the state. The Empire would be ready when the Texans arrived from the south with their fabulous herds of longhorns, their pockets filled with dinero, ready to buck the tiger or drink themselves into the Clover City jailhouse.

"This town never had an operator like Glutmann," Blaisdell said calmly. "I worked on the Barbary Coast, Sam. They cut each other's throats. Glutmann won't be satisfied with his share of the business. He'll want all of it—every cent."

"Jack will fight him to hell an' back," Sam growled. He watched a slender, blond-haired man slide into a chair at one of the tables across the room. The blond picked up a deck of cards and began to shuffle aimlessly, his small greenish eyes flitting about the room.

Blaisdell said, "I watched his game last night, Sam. He slips cards."

McQuade's eyes narrowed. He took his hands out of his pockets, pushed a chair up closer to a table and then started to walk, shoes squeaking. He took his time, the way he always went after a man, buttoning his tight-fitting coat across his chest, cracking his knuckles.

Lou Dunlap, the bartender, heard him and grinned broadly. Sam pulled up in front of the table where the blond man sat. He placed both hands flat down on the wood and leaned forward.

The gambler looked at him nervously, cleared his throat and said engagingly, as if he didn't know the big man in front of him was the house bouncer,

"Want to sit in, friend?"

McQuade grinned coldly. He thrust out his jaw and said, "Ain't this table kind o' crowded—both you an' me at it, Jack?"

"What do you mean?" the gambler mumbled.

"Get out, tinhorn," Sam rasped. "Come in this house again an' I'll pitch you through the damned window."

THE gambler scrambled back out of the way as Sam reached for his coat front with a big paw. The chair nearly went down as the crooked operator bolted.

Lou Dunlap laughed appreciatively, and even Blaisdell permitted a faint smile to flicker across his lean, sallow face. Sam walked toward the bar, picked up the glass of beer Dunlap slid toward him, then walked with it to the piano, standing it next to the music rack so that the old Professor could see it.

The white-haired man at the piano nodded his thanks, his long fingers still moving rapidly over the keys. He didn't look at Sam. His purplish, mottled face was tense, the face of a man who thought he was somebody else, who had forgotten where he was now. The Professor always had this look when he played classical music.

With his right hand still working the keys, the Professor scooped up the glass, downed the contents in one long draught and placed the glass back on the ledge. His left hand went to work on the bass again.

McQuade pushed out through the batwing doors and stood on the porch, the firelight flickering on his bulky body. There were two bonfires in the road, lighting up the nearly-completed Empire House. A freight wagon was trying to edge past the fires and the mules in the traces were balky.

The fires had been lighted with no consideration for pedestrian or rider. Both fires were near the middle of the road, and with the flames leaping as high as the second story of the building, occasional riders were having trouble with their mounts made nervous by the fire.

Sam McQuade stared at the fires, recognizing them as symbols of the brazen gall of Arno Glutmann, who with dozens of vacant lots in the town on which to erect his huge gambling emporium, had selected a site directly opposite Jack Saxon's Trails' End.

Sam spotted Glutmann, himself, standing on the walk with the contractor, watching the workmen on the scaffolding above them. Glutmann was a solid block of a man, with tremendously wide shoulders, thick waist, short, powerful legs, fully a half foot smaller than the six foot tall contractor at his side.

Glutmann wore a black frock coat and black, flat-crowned sombrero, which if anything made him appear even smaller. As he turned to glance at the bonfire Sam saw the cigar jutting from his mouth. He had a massive nose, wide, thin-lipped mouth, slitted eyes.

Sam McQuade glared at the gambling operator from the coast, hating him because he liked Jack Saxon. A peculiar relationship existed between Saxon and himself. It was not that of employer and employee. He had been the first man Saxon signed on when the Trails' End was opened, and he'd been with Saxon for ten years, longer than any other man. He'd worked in the establishment as floorman when Saxon's house had had canvas walls and ceiling, and even then Saxon, a Texan himself, had been insisting on respectability in his place of business—no tinhorn gamblers, no toughs, good liquor, a good time for all.

Saxon had been the first man in the business to entertain the Texas drovers coming up north with their longhorns, months on the dry, dusty trail, anxious for a little relaxation when they reached trails' end. Along Jackson Street now were eighteen saloons, gambling houses and dancehalls, making most of their money on the drovers, and only one of the eighteen had resisted the temptation to sell rot-gut whisky and fleece their patrons when they were under the weather.

Still Saxon had been making out for years because the Texas riders passed the word along to others that they could expect a fair deal at all times in the Trail's End. But already the trouble had started. Rumors were going around town that Saxon's games were no longer clean, that his roulette wheel had been tampered with, that Blaisdell, his faro man, was the smartest and crookedest operator in Clover City.

There was no doubt in Sam McQuade's mind as to who had started these, although no one had been able to track them down. Glutmann's money had purchased the lot and materials to erect his house; Glutmann's money was now working to discredit Jack Saxon and draw all trade into his own place. His toughs and paid killers from the Barbary Coast were circulating through the trail town, smashing up places, molesting customers entering and leaving, even burning out one place.

Big Sam walked to the far corner of the porch, facing Jack Saxon's house, which was separated from the Trails' End by a narrow alley. He saw the lights in the windows and he waited there because this was another part of the nightly ritual before the evening's real work started. The scowl left his face as he waited, lighting up a cigar,

glancing toward the windows every once in a while.

He didn't have to wait long because he'd timed himself perfectly, knowing the routine of the Saxon household. They had their supper at six o'clock sharp; from seven until eight Jack Saxon played with his baby. At eight Jack started to dress for his night's work and little Donna was supposed to be put to bed—only she wouldn't go to bed.

A window was opening, and Sam McQuade grinned broadly. He took the cigar from his mouth and looked at it. He heard Margie Saxon call, "Sam—Sam?"

She knew he'd be there, waiting, but she always called as if she didn't expect to find him, and that was part of the game, too. Sam leaned over the rail and said innocently, "What's up?"

Margie laughed. "She won't go to bed, Sam, until she'd had a piggy-ride. I can't do a thing with her."

Sam McQuade mumbled and grumbled under his breath as he walked along the porch and down the steps, but he was smiling under the brim of the brown derby. He was thinking that he'd rather lose his salary than miss one night's piggy-back ride for Donna Saxon, aged three.

CHAPTER TWO

The Fastest Draw

JACK SAXON was coming out of the door when Sam approached. Saxon stopped and was lighting a cigar in the doorway. McQuade caught a glimpse of his face. Saxon was looking across the street at Arno Glutmann. Saxon's jaw was hard, the cigar clenched tight in his teeth. His face relaxed when he heard Sam's heavy step on the boardwalk.

He said, "Bring your saddle, Sam?"

He was a man of medium height. His hair was still black but there were gray strands in it. Jack Saxon was a man who had found married happiness late in life. He'd gone to Omaha one winter, and when he returned in the spring Margie was with him. Sam McQuade had adopted her as he'd adopted Jack Saxon.

"I got some o' the damndest jobs in this house," Sam scowled. He glanced over his shoulder toward the new building and said quietly, "That's one job I'd like, Jack, puttin' a match to that place."

"We don't operate that way," Saxon told him.

"Glutmann does," Sam grated. "They're layin' two to one he'll put you out o' business a week after the first trail herd comes in."

"I'll take some of that money," Saxon said evenly, and McQuade realized there was more to it than just losing a place of business, even though that was of considerable importance. Saxon liked the Texans; he wanted to see them get a fair break when they hit town. With his house out of business, and Glutmann taking in eighty per cent of the trade, they'd be cleaned before they lighted down from their mounts.

"He'll have plenty o' lights," Sam muttered. "Plush seats upstairs, a bar that'll make ours look like China Joe's place over on Second Street. He'll have a real orchestra instead of one piano. He'll have his damned place full o' women while you've always kept that kind out."

"We'll worry about it," Jack Saxon said, "when we have to." He tilted the cigar and walked toward the saloon. McQuade went upstairs.

Little Donna squealed with joy when she saw him. She held out chubby arms and Big Sam grinned. Margie sat on a chair watching as the bouncer lifted the little girl on his back and marched around the room with her. He jounced her around for about five minutes before setting her down on the crib. He made his exit then with Donna begging for more and Margie Saxon smiling at him.

"There's a bad man downstairs I gotta throw out," Big Sam said. "You go to sleep, kid."

Margie said to him softly as he went out of the room, "There's a good man up here, Sam. He'll never be thrown out."

Big Sam mumbled something to himself as he went downstairs and out the door. There was a 'bad man' in the Trail's End—standing at the bar, arguing with Lou Dunlap. The bad man was a skinner for a buffalo hunter, just in from the plains, smelling from his gory work, heavily-whiskered, mean drunk.

Dunlap was looking around when Big Sam came through the door. The skinner was raising his voice, evidently looking for trouble. He was the kind who wanted to fight when he had liquor in him. Big Sam

had watched all kinds—the gentle drunks who quietly slid under the table when they had enough, the singing drunks, the funny drunks, and the mean ones like the skinner at the bar, a chip on his shoulder, itching for a fight.

Sam moved across the floor, the square-tipped shoes squeaking. He saw relief in Dunlap's eyes. The skinner was a big, hulking man, and he was not too drunk that he couldn't give a good account of himself with his fists.

"I'll bust this damn place wide open, mister!" he bellowed. "I'll smash it up!"

Smiling, Big Sam grasped him by the collar and the seat of his buckskin pants. Jerking him around, he charged forward, almost lifting the heavy man from the floor, propelling him toward the batwing doors.

Men skipped out of the way, grinning, as Sam went into his act. The skinner hit the doors, slamming them open. He was yelling at the top of his voice when he reached the steps leading from the porch.

Arno Glutman was crossing the road toward the Trails End when Sam came out with his man. Glutmann stopped, the cigar jutting from his mouth. He stood there with his hands deep in his pockets, heavy stomach thrust forward, solid legs braced. His back was toward the bonfires now and Sam McQuade couldn't see his face clearly.

With practiced ease, Sam got a foot up against the skinner's rear end, held him for a second, then pushed. The skinner whirled out into the road and sprawled in the dust. He got up curing with rage, still full of fight.

Big Sam came down the steps easily, cracking his knuckles. When the skinner rushed him, face distorted, red-eyed, Sam suddenly crouched down, swung his left fist into the skinner's stomach, then hit him with a right to the jaw. He'd used these punches a thousand times and they seldom failed to accomplish their purpose. The stomach punch never felt good to a man with liquor there, and the blow to the jaw usually took the rest of the fight out of him.

The skinner sat down in the dust, shaking his head stupidly. He made no attempt to get up. Sam McQuade walked back to the porch and stood there, rubbing his knuckles. Arno Glutmann walked past the skinner, coming straight toward the door.

Glutmann stopped with one foot on the lower step. He spoke with the voice of a man accustomed to getting what he wanted.

He said, "How much Saxon paying you here, Jack?"

"Why?" Sam asked evenly.

"I'll need a half dozen good floormen when I open the Empire House," Glutmann told him. "I'll pay you double what Saxon gives you." He started up the steps, his thick butcher's hands hooked in his vest pockets, the interview over as far as he was concerned. He said, "Stop in my office in the morning. You're through here right now. I'll pay you whatever you lose by quitting."

"No," Sam said.

Glutmann stopped. The big cigar swung around toward Sam and he looked up at the bigger man. "Why?" he snapped.

"There ain't enough money across the road to buy me," Big Sam said. "Roll your hoop, Glutmann."

Glutmann laughed. He said softly, "I think I'll like this town, my friend. I like them tough because when they crack then they crack for good." He walked on before Sam could say more.

SAM turned to watch him over the batwing doors. Glutmann pushed through the crowd contemptuously, walking straight up to Jack Saxon who stood at the bar chatting with a customer. Saxon turned. Sam saw his gray eyes flicker.

Sam heard a step on the wooden boardwalk below. A soft, cultured voice purred, "Evening, Sam."

McQuade turned and looked into the lean face of Golden Billy Smith, Clover City marshal. Smith was tall, spare, with golden hair and a flowing mustache. He had green, cold eyes. In three years as marshal, Smith had put six men in Boothill and never been touched by a bullet. Smith carried a pearl-handled Colt .45 on his right hip.

Sam McQuade said, "Hello, Billy."

Smith paused on the stop step and looked over the batwing doors. Sam noticed the interest in his eyes as he watched Glutmann and Jack Saxon at the bar. Smith's green eyes never left the two men inside. He said, "That skinner you just threw out, Sam. He caused trouble before?"

"No," Sam told him. "He won't be around again. He's had enough." He saw Saxon nod his head and then walk toward

his cubbyhole of an office at the far end of the bar. Glutmann followed and they disappeared inside.

Billy Smith said, "There'll be hell in this town, Sam, when Glutmann opens the Empire House. You boys figure on fighting him?"

The surprise showed in Sam's blue eyes. "Hell," he said, "you know Jack, Billy."

Smith nodded. "He's a married man now," he pointed out, "a family man."

McQuade moistened his lips. "Would his wife like him any better, Billy," he asked, "if that bullhead ran him out of town?"

Billy shrugged slender shoulders. "Sometimes," he said, "it's a hard life, Sam."

Sam McQuade watched the marshal push through the batwing doors and move toward the bar. Golden Billy pulled up at the counter and stood there, one arm resting lightly on the wood, one polished boot on the rail. He drank alone.

There were many men in Clover City Big Sam had gotten to know in ten years. He'd never known or understood Smith. The lawman kept to himself, kept his thoughts to himself. He made no friends; he did his work coldly, impersonally.

The Trail's End was fairly filled when Sam entered the saloon again. It was not the crowd they'd be getting within a week or so when the trail herds arrived, but for the off-season it was good.

When McQuade walked past Blaisdell's faro table, the gambler looked at Sam, glanced toward the door of the office and then down at his case box. He shook his head.

At the bar Lou Dunlap slid another glass of beer toward Sam. The bartender scowled. "That's the way they play it, I hear, on the Barbary Coast. They try to buy you out for one-tenth what you're worth, and when you turn 'em down they go to work."

"Jack Saxon won't sell," Sam said. He picked up the glass and walked to the piano. He set the glass down on the ledge and walked off. It was ten o'clock. At twelve the Professor had his third glass, and after that he was on his own. At dawn McQuade would pick him from the stool and carry him to his room. That, too, was part of the nightly ritual.

Arno Glutmann came out of the office in ten minutes, his hat pressed down tight on his head, a smile on his face. He left immediately.

Saxon stepped from the office a few moments later. He walked to the bar and stood for a while looking at the wood. McQuade watched him. Golden Billy Smith watched, too, standing near Blaisdell's table.

An hour after Glutmann left the tough came in, a solidly-built, red-haired man with a battered face. The redhead's nose was broken. There were scars on his face, around the eyes. He wore eastern clothes: a checked jacket, shoes instead of boots, a derby hat. His hands were big, thick-fingered. He was shorter than Big Sam, but fully as heavy.

When Sam went over to the bar Dunlap said softly, "Watch him, Sam. He looks bad."

McQuade laughed. "Glutmann brought him in with his crowd," he stated calmly. "He's here for trouble an' he'll get it."

Dunlap shook his head. "Watch them pros, Sam," he warned. "I saw one of 'em cut a man to pieces in 'Frisco."

THE ex-pugilist was up at the other end of the bar now, already talking loudly. A bartender brought him a drink. Sam watched him lift the glass to his mouth, down some of the contents, then spit the rest across the bar.

"What in hell you tryin' to sell me, George?" he snarled at the apron.

Dunlap slapped at the bar with his rag. He said to Sam, "That's it."

The red-headed tough scooped up the battle of liquor and threw it through the back-bar mirror. Glass shattered to the floor. The bartender ducked.

Big Sam glanced toward the doors. He'd seen Smith standing on the porch a moment before. Smith wore a fawn-colored sombrero. Clearly Sam saw the sombrero disappear a moment *after* the mirror smashed.

Sam bore down on his man. The redhead still leaned over the bar, watching for an attack from the side. He spun around, grining, when Sam came up.

"You're in the wrong pew, Buck!" Sam snapped. He made a grab for the redhead, but the fighter backed away. Sam grinned. He'd never met up with a professional before, but he had no qualms.

"You askin' for trouble?" the redhead chuckled.

McQuade charged him, knowing it wasn't going to be easy. He swung his left for the pro's head and missed. As he moved in he took a sledge-hammed right to the jaw. His knees buckled and he nearly fell.

Trail's End patrons, accustomed to seeing him throw toughs out for years, yelled astonishment. McQuade righted himself and lunged again. He missed twice and then the redhead knocked him down with a pile-driver right to the jaw. He got up immediately.

The redhead tore in again as Sam righted himself. He knocked his man back up against the bar. Coolly, Sam reached back with his right hand, swept up an empty bottle and, as the redhead charged again, he brought the bottle down on the man's skull, dropping him to his knees.

Dunlap slid another bottle forward, but the fight was over. Sam shook his head several times, then walked in. He yanked the redhead to his feet, jerked him around and headed him for the door. The pugilist was too stunned to fight back. His eyes were glassy as Sam helped him out.

Saxon stood near the door, watching, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully as Sam went past. He said softly, "Won't be as easy now, Sam."

"They're not so tough," Sam said. He pushed his man through the doors and sat him down on the lower step of the porch. He glanced up and down the street. The bonfires were still going in front of the Empire House. A night shift of carpenters was still on the job, the hammers banging. There was no sign of Golden Billy Smith.

Grim-faced, Sam went back inside the saloon. He said to Saxon, "Thought I saw Smith outside just before the fight."

Saxon looked at him. "You mean he walked away?"

Sam nodded. He stared into Saxon's gray eyes and saw the worry in them.

Saxon said slowly, "Golden Billy never took money from a man before, as far as I know."

"Nobody in this town," Sam observed, "ever had the kind of money Arno Glutmann is handin' out. He knows he'll get it all back in time."

"You think Smith's working for Glutmann?" Saxon murmured.

McQuade smiled. "All I know," he said thinly, "is that Billy walked away from a fight, an' he's paid to keep the peace in this town."

Saxon's lips tightened. "We'll be on our own from now on, Sam," he stated. "We might even have to fight Smith if Glutmann paid him enough."

McQuade nodded. He thought of that pearl-handled Colt on Smith's right hip, and of the men Billy had put in Boothill. Both Saxon and himself knew how to use six-shooters, but it was one thing firing a Colt gun at a target, another standing up before the fastest draw in the West.

CHAPTER THREE

Grand Opening

THE first Texas trail crew hit Clover City the following Saturday afternoon. McQuade watched the hard-bitten, bewhiskered, dusty Texans hammer down the main street. They'd driven their longhorns into the raiload corrals south of the town, and now were in for haircuts, shaves, baths, new clothes, and then the bright spots.

The Empire House was nearly finished; Texans stared at it curiously as they rode by. Many had been up from the south each summer for years and they knew the town, knew what to expect. An establishment such as Glutmann's was an eye-opener.

The Empire House stood on the corner with the porch running both ways, coming to a point. There were two entrances with overhanging balconies. Glass doors opened on the balconies from the second floor gambling room.

Glutmann was out front, watching workmen hang up the gigantic signboard at the corner. There were fixures on the board for oil lamp lighting and colored flares.

McQuade glanced up at the unpretentious signboard over his head. The signboard needed painting. It was small, and there were no lights on it.

A workman was tacking a huge painted sign on the front of the Empire House. It read,

OPEN FOR BUSINESS IN THREE DAYS—
GRAND OPENING!

Big Sam went back inside the Trail's End. Jack Saxon played solitaire at an empty table. Blaisdell stood at the bar talking with Dunlap. The Professor was at the

piano, playing softly, smoothly, the kind of music a man heard at eastern recital halls.

Saxon faced one window. He could look out and see that huge signboard going up. When Sam came over and sat down, Saxon said quietly, We'll soon see how tough he is, Sam."

Sam nodded. He had an idea how tough Glutmann could be, but he wasn't sure yet about the ace card in the deck—a lean man who walked and spoke softly, who carried a pearl-handled Colt and wore a badge on his vest. If Golden Billy Smith had agreed, for a consideration, to stay out of the coming battle between the rival saloon operators it was bad enough. But if Smith was actively on Glutmann's side, always swinging the weight of the law in Glutmann's direction, Jack Saxon was finished in Clover City.

More herds came in the next day, and the next, with the Texan drovers claiming it was going to be the biggest year in history. From Kansas to the Texas border the Chisholm Trail was jammed with longhorns.

Opening night at Empire House, Glutmann had a brass band marching around the town with a huge black and white sign coming behind, advertising the opening. The signboard over the new gambling house was ablaze. Red, blue, yellow flares sizzled in their sockets, attracting drunks the way light attracts moths.

Big Sam came out on the porch of the Trail's End just as the brass band completed its march around the town and was going inside to play for the evening. He was drawn out, not by the band, but by a strange sound coming from the front of the Trail's End—something he'd never heard before.

A barker, in loud clothes, pranced up and down along the walk directly outside the Trail's End, catching men by the buttonholes, pointing them toward the Empire House, keeping up a continuous rattle of talk.

Big Sam stared at the little man in astonishment. He'd seen barkers in front of saloons and gambling houses in town, but they'd never strayed away from their own doors.

"Best games!" the barker shouted. "Finest liquor, prettiest girls in the state! Don't miss it, gents!"

Sam stepped from the porch and, as the barker skipped by, he stuck a big hand out, grasping the man by the lapel of his coat. He said quietly, "Ain't you on the wrong side o' the street, friend?"

"All sides," the little man yelped, "are Empire's sides. Step up, gents! Step right up—"

McQuade lifted him off the ground, whirled him around and jammed him up against the porch railing. He held the little man there for a few moments as a grinning crowd gathered. The little barker wiggled like a bug on a pin.

Sam said tersely, "You git the hell over on your side o' the road. Tell Glutmann if he sends any more boys here I'm throwin' 'em right over his damned signboard."

He jerked the man toward the road then and gave him a boot. The barker landed in the dust, rolled twice, picked himself up and dashed into the Empire House.

Glutmann came through one of the doors less than sixty seconds later, the barker with him. Then came four other men, undoubtedly Empire floor men—husky, hard-faced men in tight-fitting clothes. Two carried sawed-off billiard cues.

The six stepped out into the dusty road and started across, the small, powerful Glutmann at the head of the group, hands in his pockets, a cigar in his mouth, flat-crowned sombrero pulled down tight over his face so that Sam couldn't see much more than the red glow of his cigar.

Sam held his ground, wishing he'd stuck his Smith & Wesson .44 in his waistband before coming down tonight. Ordinarily, he didn't carry a gun while on duty, Jack Saxon not liking firearms around the place.

Glutmann came up on the walk in front of the Trail's End. A crowd of men started to gather immediately, suspecting trouble. On the porch behind Sam a group of men had been talking. They stopped now.

Glutmann pulled up five feet away from Sam. He said tersely, "Mister, if you work on one of my boys again I'll have you run out of this town on a rail."

Sam looked at the four grinning toughs behind Glutmann. One hefted the club in his hand. Sam saw where the tip of it had been hollowed out and filled with lead.

"I'll work on every man," Sam said slowly, "who comes within smellin' distance of this house."

Glutmann's jaw tightened. He said softly, "Go get him, boys."

McQuade buttoned his coat. He stepped away from the porch to give himself room to swing. He knew what he was in for. The four Empire House floormen weren't ordinary citizens. They'd been hired because they were tough with their fists. Any one could undoubtedly give a good account of himself alone.

THE man with the billiard cue came in on Sam's left, slapping the stick gently into the palm of his free hand. The other three spread out. The tough in the center, a squat man with a bulldog face, was set to lunge in when the voice from the porch stopped him.

Saxon said, "I'll shoot the first man takes another step."

McQuade turned his head. Saxon stood in the porch shadows. He'd just stepped through the crowd, a gun in his hand, the barrel glinting in the dim light.

Blaisdell, the gambler, came through, a short-barreled Remington pistol in his hand. Lou Dunlop was there, too, hefting a Greener. The Professor came out last, walking the way he always did like a man in a stupor, but sober now. The Professor had a huge Sharps buffalo gun in his hands.

Jack Saxon said slowly, "Glutmann, call your dogs off, and if you send them over here again I'm coming after you myself."

Glutmann stood on the walk, the cigar jutting toward the sky. He stood there, feet braced on the wooden boards as if he'd grown out of them. He said tersely, "Saxon, I wouldn't take that damned talk from the devil."

"You'll take it from me," Saxon told him.

There was a long silence during which both men stared at each other. Then the Professor's buffalo gun roared. Whether it went off accidentally, or on purpose, McQuade never found out.

The ball slammed into the wood to Glutmann's right, tearing a jagged hole in the rotting boards. The four floormen with Glutmann scurried back across the road. Glutmann held his ground. He hadn't budged when the heavy gun barked. He said to Saxon, "I gave you a way out, Saxon and you didn't take it. It'll be tough from now on."

Turning, Glutmann walked across the street and disappeared into the Empire House. Golden Billy Smith pushed leisurely through the crowd. Big Sam saw him coming and he waited grimly.

Smith said to Saxon, "Trouble, Jack?"

"Nothing I can't handle myself."

The marshal shrugged thin shoulders. "Getting touchy, Jack," he said, and he passed on up the street.

McQuade walked back inside the Trail's End with Saxon. He said, "I didn't want to start this thing, Jack. Glutmann had his barker paradin' up an' down in front of our place. I threw him out in the road."

"You didn't start it," Saxon smiled. "Glutmann started it himself when he bought that lot across the way."

"And it won't stop now," Blaisdell said from behind them, "until one or the other is put out of business.

"We're still doing pretty well," Saxon observed. The Trail's End was jammed tonight, even with the Empire taking away some trade, and this was only the season's beginning. Saxon's reputation still drew big business.

Big Sam watched the tall man as he stepped up to the bar and stood there, his back to the door, both hands on the wood. He said to Sam, "Get your saddle, bronco."

McQuade nodded. He went out and walked straight to the house this time because it was already a little late. Margie Saxon was waiting, little Donna on her lap. They were going through the pages of a story book.

The little girl scrambled down and raced toward Sam, arms extended. He scooped her up and danced her around the room a few times. He noticed that the mother didn't get up. She sat looking at him, her face pale. Sam knew then that she'd been at the window when Glutmann came over with his floormen. She'd heard the words spoken.

"Don't worry about it," Sam told her after they'd put Donna to bed. "Jack can take care of himself."

"You can't dodge a bullet from a dark alley," Margie murmured. "You know that, Sam."

"There's law in this town," Sam stated. "It ain't wild like it used to be, Margie."

"The law," Margie said slowly, "was standing in the darkened doorway of Cannivan's drygoods store when Glutmann came over with his men. I saw him step out only when the Professor fired."

Sam moistened his lips. "Jack's got

friends," he maintained. "We'll all back him up."

The woman smiled and shook her head. "You've been the best friend Jack ever had," she said, "but your fists won't help him, Sam, when the shooting starts." She sat down in a chair and stared across the room at the opposite wall. "I—I wish he'd sell out and leave Clover City," she said suddenly.

"He'll never run in this world," Sam told her. "You know him, Margie. He'd hate himself the rest of his life. He'd start to hate you for making him do it."

He left her staring at the wall; he knew that every night from now on she'd be sitting there, dying inwardly every time some wild Texan shot off his gun. She'd be waiting for him to come in with the news.

ON THE street again Sam spotted Golden Billy Smith, moving with that unhurried stride. Smith stopped a few feet away. He started to light a cigar. Sam saw his lean face illuminated by the match flash. He said softly, "Sam, Jack seemed kind of peeved tonight. What's wrong?"

"Maybe," Big Sam told him, "Jack likes to keep his place, Billy. He don't want to see it closed up."

Smith nodded. "That's his fight with Glutmann," he said. "I don't take sides in these personal quarrels."

McQuade said innocently, "No?"

The lawman turned to face him fully. He stood with his back to the light from the Empire House, his tall frame silhouetted against the yellow glow of the oil lamps and the colored flares. He didn't speak for a long time. Then: "Sam, when a man starts talking your way he can't figure on living too long."

He walked off, leaving Sam staring after him, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He'd seen Billy Smith shoot a man down in front of the Trail's End the previous winter. Three bullets had crashed into the gunfighter's stomach while he was still trying to make his draw. It had not been pleasant.

Back inside the saloon Jack Saxon was giving instructions to three men. Saxon was afraid of fire more than anything else. He was posting watchmen in the rear of the building. They were to remain there all night.

As Sam stood listening to Saxon, he heard guns popping all over town. The Texans were riding up and down the streets, firing into the air, whooping, releasing the energy they'd stored up those lonesome months on the trail.

A half dozen of them whirled past the Trail's End, one rider taking his horse up on the walk, scattering men passing by. No effort was made tonight to restrain them.

Saxon took Sam's arm when the floorman came up. He led him to the far end of the bar where they were alone for a moment. He said quietly, "Sam, if anything happens to me see to it that Margie and Donna get back to Omaha. She has a father and a brother there."

Big Sam scowled. "If Glutmann tries anything," he said tersely, "I'll go over there and bust him up."

The owner smiled. "This is past the fist-fighting stage, Sam," he said. "Stay out of trouble."

"If there's trouble," Sam told him, "I'll be in it, Jack. You can gamble on that."

He was busy from then on until midnight. The saloon was jammed after eleven o'clock, and Sam threw out a half dozen troublesome drunks; he talked wild-eyed Texans out of other fights, and at a little past midnight he went out on the porch for a breathing spell.

Glancing across at the Empire House he saw over the batwing doors of one entrance. The long, mahogany bar with the ornate mirrors and shelves was nearly deserted. White-aproned bartenders were talking down at one end. Most of the card tables on the lower floor were vacant. The brass band was playing, but there were no dancers.

Sam grinned broadly. He'd been afraid of tonight, but the Texan riders had made their choice. It was Jack Saxon's square games and good liquor against Arno Glutmann's elaborate lay-out, tinhorn gamblers and cheap whiskey and beer. The trail riders had strung along with Saxon.

Glutmann came out on the porch and stared across the street. He walked out to the edge of the porch, glanced toward the north end of town—the direction of the railroad station—and then took his cigar from his mouth and tossed it out into the road. The stub threw up a tiny shower of sparks as it died.

Glutmann came down the steps and started across the street for the Trail's End. He waited while two Texan riders raced by, whooping hilariously, one of them twirling a beer bottle in his hand. A flurry of shots came from the west end of town, and then a burst of wild laughter.

Arno Glutmann came up on the boardwalk and stopped there. He looked up at Big Sam standing near the railing, smoking a cigar. He said slowly, "Tell Saxon I'd like to see him out here."

Sam McQuade looked down at the man. He noticed the bulge under Glutmann's coat, indicating he was armed, but he didn't think the man had come over for a deliberate shoot-out. Glutmann was too smart for that, for any kind of play where the odds were even.

"Why do you want him?" Sam asked.

"I'll tell *him,*" Glutmann rasped. He made no attempt to come forward, and again Sam sensed the danger. The band had stopped playing and for one brief moment the town was quiet. Then the orchestra in the Roseland Dancehall up the street swung into action. The Professor, who had been quiet, started to hammer out a tune on the piano inside.

McQuade was taking the cigar from his mouth when he heard the step on the porch, and then Jack Saxon's cool voice.

"Trouble out here, Sam?" Saxon asked. When he saw Glutmann he said, "What can I do for you, Mr. Glutmann?"

Glutmann took a long time to answer. He said finally, "Saxon, I made you an offer the other day. You turned it down."

"I'm still turning it down," Saxon said quietly. "If that's what you came over for, you're wasting your time, Glutmann."

Big Sam glanced up the road to see three wild riders careening down the street toward them. They were whooping and yipping as they came on, firing into the air.

Glutmann glanced that way then turned his head again. He said grimly, "I'm not so sure, Saxon."

CHAPTER FOUR

Lights Out

SAM McQUADE sensed the danger first. Those riders were coming too close to the walk, dashing in directly behind Glutmann who stood at the edge of the board sidewalk. All three had guns out, and as they came into the light he saw they'd pulled their bandannas up across the lower portions of their faces.

At a distance of fifteen feet one lined his sixgun on Jack Saxon. Sam yelled the warning. He heard the sharp intake of Saxon's breath and the soft slap as Saxon's right hand hit the butt of the gun inside his coat.

Flame spat from the muzzle of the gun in the first rider's hand. There was the sickening sound of lead striking flesh. Big Sam heard Saxon's cry as he slumped to his knees.

Two more guns banged as the other riders swept in behind the first. One bullet tore through Sam's coat as he leaped in front of Saxon. Another bullet struck Saxon and he went down hard on his back and lay still.

The riders kept going, spurring their horses. Arno Glutmann still stood on the walk, looking down at Saxon.

Blind fury swept through Sam. Glutmann had arranged this. The three riders had not been drunk; were not celebrating Texan trail riders. They were Glutmann's hired killers.

Sam McQuade leaped from the porch and tore across the boardwalk. Glutmann was reaching for his gun inside his coat when Sam hit him. Heavy fists lashed out, tearing at Glutman's flesh.

The short man stumbled back into the road, a long gash opened under his right eye, his lips pulverized from the vicious punches Big Sam had given him, but he was not unconscious. He rolled as he hit the dust of the road, his hat falling from his head. He came up on one elbow and with his free hand yanked out his gun.

McQuade saw the muzzle lifting. He was unarmed, himself, but he had little doubt that Glutmann was going to kill him. It was in his eyes, a murderous hate—the blind, insensate hate of a proud man who had been knocked down probably for the first time in his life.

Sam waited for the impact of the bullet, but it never came. A gun cracked from the doorway behind him. Glutmann's body jerked as the bullet struck him. His gun barrel drooped and he rolled over on his back.

Turning his head, McQuade saw Blaisdell standing behind the batwing doors, looking over them. Blaisdell was looking down at Jack Saxon, an expression of regret on his lean face.

McQuade never saw the bullet which hit Blaisdell. He was going up the porch steps, dropping down beside Saxon when he heard the gun bang from across the street, a point a little to his right. The green glass of one of the doors was shattered as a bullet tore through it.

Looking up, Sam saw Blaisdell grasp the tops of the two doors with both hands. He stood there for one moment, looking down at the porch floor, a peculiar expression on his face. Then the doors swung outward and Blaisdell fell forward on his face. His gun slipped from limp fingers and skidded across the floor, coming to a stop against Saxon's body.

Big Sam made a leap for the gun. His big fingers closed around the handle, and then a bullet slammed into the wood of the porch pillar a foot to his right. He heard Golden Billy Smith say coolly, "Don't be a fool, Sam."

Sam McQuade stared at him, at the gun in Smith's right hand, very steady on the target. He let Blaisdell's gun fall to the floor again. He picked up Jack Saxon from the floor. Blaisdell was dead.

Margie Saxon screamed as Sam carried her husband to the door. She'd heard the shots. Men were running from the Trail's End; others were coming out of the Empire House. Arno Glutmann's floormen picked Glutmann up, carried him into the gambling house.

Sam called to Lou Dunlap, "Get Doc Hemsley!"

He carried Saxon into the house, up to his room. He saw the look on Margie's face. Little Donna had been awakened and was whimpering in her room.

"He's dead," Margie whispered. "He's dead, Sam. I know it."

They got the saloonman's coat and shirt off. McQuade looked at the bullet wounds. There were two: one in the right shoulder, the second lower down in the left side.

Doc Hemsley, a small, shriveled-up man with thin brown hair, bustled into the room. He examined the wounds quickly, called for plenty of warm water, and then, when Margie ran out of the room to get the water, he said to Sam, "Bad enough, but not too bad. When I get these bullets out he'll be layed up for quite a while. Who did it?"

"Glutmann," Big Sam said slowly. He watched the doctor getting out instruments. Then he turned and walked toward the door. He went out into the kitchen where Margie was bustling around, trying to keep the tears down, heating up kettles and pans of water. "Doc says it's not too bad," Sam told her. "He'll come out of it."

Margie sank down on a chair. Her hands were across her face and her shoulders shook. Sam placed a hand on her shoulder and then went out. He walked back to the Trail's End and found the saloon almost empty. Smith stood by the door, watching Lou Dunlap put out the lights. The Professor was still at the piano, playing softly now with no crowd to listen.

Dunlap stood on a ladder. He looked at Sam and then at Smith. He didn't say anything. Same came over to the bar and stood there. Blaisdell's silver card case lay on the green table where he'd left it to take part in the fight which had finished him. There were cards on the table, cards strewn on the floor.

Big Sam said evenly, "What goes, Billy?"

"You're closed up," Golden Billy Smith told him. "This house is disorderly. It's not good for the town."

SAM glanced over the batwing doors. The Empire House, lights blazing, was more crowded than it had been before the shooting started. Some of the customers from the Trail's End had drifted across the road when Smith announced the closing of Saxon's.

"You're the law," McQuade said, his voice cold. "You know what you're doing, Billy."

"That's right," Smith nodded. He was drinking a glass of beer, one arm on the bar.

"You're the law," Big Sam went on. "You started lookin' for those boys shot down Jack Saxon?"

Golden Billy shrugged. "Town's full of drunks tonight," he stated. "I got the story from a boy across the road who saw it happen. The Texans were shooting up the town and some of their bullets went wild.

I'd say they were half way back to Texas by now."

Sam shook his head. "No," he said. "They're still in town, Billy.

The Clover City marshal lifted the beer glass to his mouth and then set it down again. His green eyes were narrowed, but he was smiling. "What makes you think that, Sam?"

"Because," Sam said slowly, "Glutmann told 'em you wouldn't be lookin' for 'em after they murdered Saxon."

Dunlap nearly fell off the ladder. He righted himself and turned and stared at Sam. The Professor stopped playing. He sat on his stool, looking at the blank music stand in front him, his hands resting on the keys.

Smith turned, put both elbows on the bar and leaned against it. When he spoke his voice was very soft. "Sam, you don't carry a gun."

"No," McQuade said.

"Get one," Billy Smith said, "tonight." He walked past Sam out through the bat-wing doors.

Dunlap came down from the ladder, walked around the bar without a word, took down three glasses and poured out drinks, stiff ones. When Sam came over he said quietly, "That wasn't smart, Sam."

Sam picked up the Professor's glass and walked with it to the piano. He set it down on the piano top. He walked back to the bar and picked up his own glass. The Professor said, his voice thick, "Sam, you're a good man. I don't want to see you die. Get a horse and ride the hell out of here. He won't go after you."

"No?" Sam said. He lifted his glass and downed the contents. He didn't usually drink during working hours, and then he remembered that there were no more working hours. Golden Billy had closed them up.

"How's Jack?" Dunlap asked.

"He'll come through," Sam told him.

The bartender nodded. "That's enough. We'll let it go like that, but you get out, Sam. You're no good to us, dead."

Big Sam put the glass down on the bar and wiped his lips with the back of his sleeve. He smiled at Dunlap and then walked around the bar and ducked down through a small door which led to the rear of the building. He had a little cubby-hole of a room back here.

He went into the room, fumbled around in the top drawer for a moment and came out with a Colt .45. He broke the gun and examined the charges before shoving it in his waistband. When he came back into the saloon, Dunlap said, "I wouldn't try it, Sam. A bullet and a fist are two different things."

"We'll see," Sam said. He walked past behind the Professor, who had started to play again after downing his drink. The Professor said, "Don't try to match draws with him, Sam. He'll empty his gun into you before you get yours out into the open."

"I'll remember it," Sam said. He paused. Then: "I never knew your name, Professor."

"Elwood," the Professor said, and went on playing.

McQuade stepped outside. A crowd had gathered in front of the saloon. Small groups of men were standing on the corner; there were other groups across the road in front of the Empire House.

A man said, "Glutmann just died, Sam."

Big Sam nodded. His shoes squeaked as he went down the steps. He stopped here and said to the man nearest him, "Which way did Billy Smith go, George?"

"Up toward the jailhouse," the man told him. He looked at Sam, turned his head away and then stared again. Sam had slipped the big Colt gun from his belt and was carrying it in his hand as he walked away through the crowd. He heard a man say in a hushed voice,

"Big Sam's goin' after Smith!"

Sam kept walking, taking his time, his hat perched on the back of his head, square-tipped shoes squeaking. He had the jacket buttoned tight across his front; his huge hands dangling from the short sleeves of the jacket, the gun in his right hand, muzzle pointing toward the ground.

He passed Saxon's house and then walked on to the corner. When he glanced back over his shoulder once he saw a mob of men following him slowly, a huge semi-circle, moving along both walks, out in the middle of the road. Other men were coming out of saloons and gambling houses, falling in with this crowd.

BIG Sam crossed the street and continued down toward the jail-house, a one-story brick structure half way down the

next block, and across the road. He saw the yellow light in the window of the jail-house and the rectangle of light in the doorway.

The crowd stopped at the corner and Sam went on alone, angling across the road. A group of men came out of the Ace-High Saloon directly opposite the jail. They watched him silently as he kicked up dust, crossing the road.

Sam stopped fifteen feet from the door of the jail, still out in the road. The hand holding the gun felt clammy. He slipped the gun into his left hand for a moment, wiped his right hand across his jacket, and then replaced the gun.

He wasn't afraid of dying; he was afraid that he would miss Golden Billy Smith—very much afraid. He expected to die because Smith didn't miss at that distance, but he wanted Billy to die, too. That was important; that was much more important than living.

Lifting his voice, Sam called sharply, "Smith."

He stood there with the gun pointing toward the ground. He saw a shadow fall across the patch of light in front of the door, and then Golden Billy came out, his slim grame silhouetted against the doorway, a good target.

Big Sam said quietly, "I have a gun, Billy. I'm goin' to use it."

SMITH saw the gun; the Clover City marshal could see him clearly out in the road, the light from the Ace-High and several other buildings close by providing plenty illumination.

Billy Smith wanted a little time. He hadn't expected a man to come after him because it had never happened before. He said, "Sam, drop that gun."

"Come and take it away," Sam invited. He heard the soft sigh run through the watching crowd. The men outside the Ace-High had ducked inside again, but the men at the corner were still there, out of the line of fire.

Golden Billy Smith lifted a hand to his face. His right hand was hanging close to his gun. Big Sam watched closely, knowing what he had to do, hoping against hope that he could stand up against a bullet long enough to get in one good shot.

When Smith's left hand came down from his face he went into action.

Sam started forward, lifting his gun. He saw Smith's sixgun wink. He braced his body to take the bullet. He didn't try to dodge. He walked toward Smith's gun. This seemed to disconcert Smith. His first shot missed. His second and third didn't miss.

Big Sam kept walking. He was spun half around from the impact of the first bullet, which tore through his left shoulder, but he kept coming up on the walk, directly up to the bottom step of the jail-house, his gun lined on the target.

Smith's second bullet took him in the body, low down, near the stomach, on the right side. Then Sam McQuade's Colt roared. He was reaching forward with the gun as he squeezed the trigger, getting as close to his man as was possible. He saw Smith's face indistinctly just before his gun roared. Golden Billy was backed up against the brick wall of the building, shrinking against it, terror distorting his face.

Big Sam didn't know how many times he fired before he fell. That second bullet from Smith's gun had taken the strength from him. He fell forward on the steps, his vision blurring. He heard Smith's body strike the steps beside him as Billy also fell.

Lying there, McQuade heard a man shouting as if from a distance. "He got him! He got Billy Smith!"

He felt himself being carried then. He heard Lou Dunlap saying, "The damned fool—the damned, big fool!"

Then he was in the same room where he'd carried Jack Saxon only a short while before. Doc Hemsley was bending over him. He heard Hemsley say, "That bullet would have killed a buffalo. It won't kill him."

Sam opened his eyes. He saw Margie Saxon standing at the foot of the bed, watching him, tears streaming down her cheeks. He turned his head and looked at Saxon on the other side of the room. Saxon's eyes were open. He was looking straight at his floor man. Saxon said softly, "You big ox."

There was a lot of pain, but Big Sam managed to smile. He said slowly, "Open for business tomorrow, Jack." He was proud to say it.

THE END

SATAN SNARES A SINNER

By Jimmy Nichols

LOU SIMMONS was a wild and reckless youngster of eighteen when he hit Washoe, Texas, in 1871. Fast with his gun and looking for trouble, he hoped to live up to his father's record and reputation. The parent, Everett "Ace" Simmons, had been feared if not respected in that part of Texas. An unusually quick-tempered and quarrelsome man, he had been quick and able to protest his hurt feelings.

Young Lou was packing one of his father's heavily notched weapons when he visited the Gold Rim Saloon one January evening. He strode in cockily, head held high, shoulders proudly squared. He stepped up to the bar.

"Wal, if it ain't Ace Simmons' young rooster!" a voice mocked. "Playin' bad man with his paw's iron!"

Simmons whirled to face John Rolfsohn, a man who earned his living as a cowpoke in the summer and merely decorated the local taverns in the cold weather. He did neither very well. They glared at each other. If there was any further exchange of words, no one heard them. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Rolfsohn hit young Simmons in the jaw. Simmons knocked him down, and as Rolfsohn reached for his gun, Simmons fired.

A mob gathered excitedly around the dying man. A few voices were raised to testify that Simmons had drawn first. An argument started and, as it mounted, the young gunman slipped out of the saloon and high-tailed it to Texarkana.

Somewhere on the way, he lost his fight. He changed his name, fell in love with and married a sweet-faced and devout minister's daughter named Juliana Andrews and learned to be a telegrapher. He was a model husband and, a few years later, the model father of two children. Whenever he could forget about the blood-spattered face of John Rolfsohn lying pale as death on the stained floor, Simmons was extraordinarily happy. But the past was almost always uppermost in his mind. He still hid from strangers, jumped whenever a door opened suddenly behind him.

One evening as he was sitting over his key, a message came tapping in, directed to the local sheriff. It read, "Understand Lou Simmons formerly of Washoe is hiding out there from a charge sworn against him in 1871 . . . ." Simmons did not wait to hear the rest. He felt he could not bear to see his wife suffer his disgrace. Drawing his sixgun, he shot himself. He did not even wait for the remainder of the message to sputter on the key. It was received hours later, after his body had been removed. It said, "Request you tell him man he shot did not die and charges withdrawn."

DEAD MEN'S TRAIL DRIVE

By Marvin De Vries

They were tough, those killers of the Painter Creek Pool. But even whang-leather hides, stone hearts and steel guts can fail when Boothill sends the ghost of a rope-hauled corpse to claim from the fear-haunted living—a blood debt payable only in a dead man's hell!

Johnny hit him in the leg and brought him to his knees

CHAPTER ONE

Whip Man

BREDE GULLEN, trail boss for the Painter Creek pool drive to Dodge, had a bull whip he liked to use. With equal ease he could flick a seed-pod off a stem or an ear off a man. He kept it in the hoodlum and often in the evening when he had some spare time, he got it out and showed off. A week before he had made Snack Moon, the cook, hold out a sulphur match he claimed he could light. But he missed his aim and took off a piece of Snack's finger. In consequence there was considerable hard feeling between the two, the big trail boss claiming Snack had moved, and Snack, of course, was sore about his finger.

This particular evening, though, after they had thrown the mixed herd of five different pool brands on the bed ground, Brede didn't need a target to show off on. He said he was going over and give Billy, the young horse wrangler, a whipping.

"Damned kid let them horses drift all over hell's creation last night!" he grumbled. "I'll teach him!"

Johnny Torrell, a puncher who had hired out to the pool before they got their herd

across the Red, listened to the bluster. He minded his own business until Brede Gullen climbed his horse and rode out to the remuda. Then Torrell got aboard the animal he had on the picket line for the night trick and tagged along.

Torrell had been friendly with the wrangler and, for reasons he didn't explain, wasn't sure Gullen meant to whip Billy. But if he did, Johnny planned to interfere. Brede, of course, would turn on him, and Johnny calculated it would cost him some stripped hide and torn flesh. He had seen a man get it like that once, down on the Brazos, and it had turned his stomach. The wrangler would suffer no such treatment if Torrell could help it.

Brede didn't seem to realize he was being followed, and Billy had no idea what Brede was up to. He rode in with a grin on his face until he got within reach. Then the whip snaked out and picked a hole in his shirt. His face turned white. Brede snatched the lash back for another try, but Johnny came in close from behind and let it curl around the thick of his arm. Then he jerked back and Brede lost his hold. With an oath he jumped his horse around and roared, "What the hell you mean, buttin' into this? Gimme that whip."

Johnny shook his head, hauling in slack. "You can't do it to the kid, mister," he stated. "You'll lay him up for a week."

"Now wouldn't that be just too bad," Brede flared. "Gimme that whip. It's my own damn' business what I do around here!"

"I don't reckon so," Johnny answered. "Leastways, I don't aim to see him whupped. Ride off, Billy."

The wrangler obeyed, and a load went off Johnny's shoulders. Facing up to the trail boss this way was probably something few men would condone, least of all Gullen himsef. But Torrell had his reasons. The trail boss rode closer, and Torrell let him come. When he was close enough Johnny threw him the whip and stood his ground. "You cin put it to me all you please, mister," he stated, "but if you ever try it on that kid again I'll kill you!"

Gullen took the invitation. The whip snaked around Torrell's midriff, lifting him clear of the saddle and throwing him to the ground. He flattened out, buried his face in his arms to save his eyes; his back got most of it. He had seen magpies go after a horse with saddle sores, pecking out the flesh, and that was what it felt like. Gullen marked him from head to foot, but didn't get a whimper out of him. Johnny figured he would let up after a certain amount of it, enough to satisfy his conceit, but he didn't. He meant to cut Torrell to pieces.

JOHNNY'S hand snaked for his gun but the whip snapped his wrist and tore the six away. Gullen was having the time of his life and Johnny was now far past running. He had no choice but to lie there and take it. But then, all at once, it stopped, and he heard the dire threat in a man's voice. It stopped Gullen in his tracks.

"Don't do it, Elk," he begged in a scared rasp. "Don't do it. Don't do it!"

Elk was a half-breed puncher, a friendly man to anyone who didn't see him as a half-breed. "Get to camp," he told Brede. "Go quick." There was a terrible intensity in his voice, as if he were afraid of himself, afraid he might shoot before Gullen got out of his sight. Brede Gullen didn't mistake the quality of the threat, and moved.

Elk Okichob got Johnny to the creek and stripped off his clothes. His pants and shirt came off in shreds. Johnny could hardly talk, but he told Elk he had a spare shirt and levis, and Elk got them. "Now just leave me alone, Elk," Johnny said. "I'm gonna git down in this water and sit there. I give you my thanks."

Elk went away and Torrell bathed and cooled his battered body. He had to quell the sheer fury that boiled up inside him and try to think of something else, something that would put his feet back on the ground again and level him off. But it was hard to do. "I just hope," he told himself, his hands still shaking with rage, "Brede Gullen is the man I'm a-lookin' for. I'd enjoy it fine to kill him."

He heard a noise in the brush behind him, and looked back, but couldn't see anybody. Later he heard it again and then Billy, the wrangler, spoke up, and asked if it was all right if he came in.

"Sure," Johnny said. "Come on."

Billy didn't move. "I got some salve."

"Well, come on."

"I don't know if I ought. You haven't got any clothes on, have you? You see,

I—I—" The wrangler suddenly broke off.

"Yeah, I know. You're a girl. Wait a minute." Torrell got into clean levis, twisting and squirming to pull it over the welts, and then sat down again. "I knew it a long time," he added. "I knew it ever since I throwed in with this bunch. I don't believe you're foolin' anybody. You're too old to get away with anything like that."

She sat down beside him without a word and spread the salve over his back. Then she got him into his shirt. "You won't tell anybody, will you?" she asked.

"I sure will," Torrell said. "I'm going to tell everybody unless you pull out of here pronto. You haven't got any business here. How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"That's too damn old for a girl to be playing boy, and old enough for her to know better."

"Did you come and take that whipping for me because you knew I was a girl?"

"Sure. He would've cut you to pieces. He's a crazy man with that whip."

"I expect I couldn't have took it."

"And when somebody tried to put some salve on your back, what then?"

"That sure would've let the cat out of the bag."

"Don't you know this is a tough bunch? What ails you anyway? How'd you get this job?"

"I asked for it. I said I could wrangle horses, and I can, too. And I've got to stay."

"Oh, no, you're not. I'm not goin' to take another whippin' for you."

"I've got to stay, Johnny. I got a reason. I'm not known where this pool comes from. I just drifted in and hired out. One of them pool owners killed my pop and I aim to find out which one. I got to stay."

Johnny sat bolt upright. "And what," he asked, settling down again, "would you do if you found him?"

"Kill him," she said slowly.

"With what?"

"I got a hand gun and carbine. I keep 'em both handy."

Johnny put his hand on her arm. "I'm lookin' for a polecat myself," he told her. "Maybe he's the same one you're lookin' for. I'll keep my mouth shut about you. I would anyway, you know that. I just wanted to scare you off."

"I know it."

"Only don't go off half-cocked. You talk it over with me before you do anything. Don't make a move without first lettin' me hear about it."

"I won't."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"Now you better run or I—I'll—well, I won't say just yet what I'd do."

She looked up at him. "Any time, Johnny. Any time," she told him, and moved away.

Johnny chuckled to himself. "I reckon," he told himself, "it was worth the whuppin'."

The salve glued his shirt to his back, but it felt cool and comforting, and the blind fury was gone out of his head. He was sure he could face Brede Gullen with a grin when he got back to camp, but he stayed off in the dark for some time. He heard Billy ride away. As well as he could see, Elk Okichob wasn't in camp. Brede was there and the other pool owners. They were having some kind of an argument that was getting them all into a boil. Brede finally climbed his horse and rode off. Johnny started back.

Mel Acaby, who owned the Box A iron, was standing with his back to the campfire, still arguing with the other three. He held a small piece of paper in his hand and was shaking it at the other men. "Mebbe Brede thinks it's funny, but it's no joke to me!" he roared.

That was all the talk Johnny heard. A rifle shot cut it short. He didn't see gunflame so he couldn't tell where the shot came from. But he saw Acaby lurch, and let out a scream that came to a sudden halt, as if someone had grabbed him by the throat and choked it off. He went over backward into the campfire.

CHAPTER TWO

Grave for One

MEL ACABY was hit in the chest close to the heart. Brede Gullen said later he saw the shot fired when he was riding out to the bed ground. Early the next morning Torrell, in spite of the whipping, got the sorry chore of digging a grave and burying the pool owner. As a gesture to

propriety, perhaps, Gil Hawthorne went along. Gil owned the Gee Haw. He didn't exactly fit in with the rest of them, although Johnny wasn't taking a shine to any of them until he knew which one of the lot was the man with whom he had to settle. For all he knew, it might be the man he was burying. He looks ornery enough to rope-haul a man and jerk him apart, the way my pop was done by, Johnny thought as he dug.

Hawthorne stood by in silence. Once he brushed his hand across his face, as if to push away his thoughts. He didn't offer to help, but showed some consideration for Johnny's condition. "Seems as if that ought to be deep enough," he remarked finally. "I don't reckon he'll get out."

"Not by himself," Johnny said.

"Brede gave you quite a whuppin', didn't he?"

"He did," Johnny answered.

"I wouldn't cross him, son," Hawthorne advised. "He flies off the handle almighty hard."

"He didn't hurt me."

"Where were you when Mel got shot?"

"Down by the creek, coolin' off."

"You didn't see the shot?"

"I didn't see nothin'. I was too damn' mad, but I heard you augurin'."

"Torrell," Hawthorne mused, letting the name curl over his lips like a tune. "Seems as if I recollect a man by that name. Used to run a small-tally outfit along Painter Creek."

"Is that so?"

"He wouldn't be any kin of yours, would he?"

"I wouldn't know," Johnny said. "I expect there's lots of Torrells."

"I expect. His name was Nate Torrell."

"Oh."

"There was a whole nestful of them small-tally outfits along the creek, but they all swung a wide loop and we had to clean 'em out."

"You did, eh? How'd you do it?"

"The way it's aways done, son. They had it coming and they got it. Seems as if I recollect Nate had a boy."

"Is that right?"

"The only reason I mentioned it was because of your name. A young hot-head is apt to pick up trouble like that and make it his own. But I expect if you were on that old trail you would've changed your name before you rode in here."

"I expect so. It would seem the reasonable thing to do."

Hawthorne canted his head at the hole. "That's good enough."

Johnny straightened and swung the shovel over his shoulder. They walked back to camp together. Mel Acaby had gotten a warning note of what was to happen. That was what all the auguring was about when Johnny saw them from the creek. It was written on the piece of paper he was waving at the other three men when he got shot. "Your time has come," it read.

It was printed in block letters on a piece of tally-book paper. The other pool owners, including Gullen, had each gotten one, too, although they were all slightly different, setting up a five-day schedule of killing that had started with Acaby and would finally wind up with Gullen. They had been lying on the end-gate of the chuckwagon, Snack Moon said. He had no idea who had put them there. "And ten minutes after Mel Acaby got his, he was dead," he stated. "Ain't that something?"

Johnny nodded. "Sure is."

"Now today it's Sid Pocock's turn," Snack went on. "We'll see how it works out."

"Who's next after Pocock?"

"Bat Corrin. He owns that BC stock. Then it's Gil Hawthorne's turn, and finally Gullen."

"It must give 'em a funny feeling."

"Son," Snack remarked, "I don't think so."

AS A matter of fact, Sid Pocock looked pretty sick. Brede Gullen said he was working on it, and he quizzed Johnny for some time, and all the rest of the crew during the course of the day. He even rode out and talked with Billy. Johnny watched as well as he could, and sweat bullets, but he could only guess at what was said, and how much Brede surmised.

Sid Pocock followed the trail boss around, and wanted to know developments from time to time, but he couldn't get much satisfaction.

"You ain't got any idea how fast time goes, Brede," he observed. "Hell, in no time it'll be night again."

"That's how it goes," Brede answered.

"Night and day—day and night." He had a palsy of some kind in one eye that kept it partly closed and gave him a sinister expression.

"What d'you s'pose is goin' to happen to me, Brede?" Sid asked.

"How would I know? Go ask Acaby. I'm doin' the best I can."

"I know, Brede. I know. But I don't like to sit around and just wait."

"Cin Elk Okichob write?"

Pocock said he could. Sid owned the Broken Diamond P, and Elk usually worked for him. "I seen him write. He prints it out like that. But I wouldn't say it was him, would you?"

"I don't know," Brede sputtered. "I'm just thinkin'." He gathered up all the tally books and tried to match the torn edges, and the like, but he didn't seem to make much headway.

Johnny did his usual work, riding drag where Brede had put him the first day, and kept him. He worried about Billy all day. If Brede found out she was a girl, she was in hot water sure, in more ways than one. It would show she was up to something, and Gullen, with his whip, would get it out of her. To tell the truth, Torrell wasn't so sure she hadn't done it. By her own tell, she could use a gun, and she had had a chance to do it after she left him at the creek the night before. Somehow, what she was up to tied in with his own plans, and it was possible that, in spite of her promise to him, she had gone ahead without letting him know. It sent a thin shiver up his spine to think of her setting up a cold-blooded deal like that, but it wasn't beyond all reason.

He worried about the talk he had had with Gil Hawthorne, too. It showed Gil had a notion he might be involved. He was edging entirely too close to the truth for comfort, and if Pocock actually did get killed, Gil would probably come out with what he suspected.

Elk was the only man he talked to. Elk rode drag, too, and the dust hid them. He said Brede meant to get it out of them with his whip when they bedded down for the night.

"Out of you and me?"

"And Billy."

"Did he tell you that?"

"He said he'd get the truth out of our hides, and that's just what he meant."

"Why pick on us?"

"We can't account for ourselves when Mel got it."

"I was at the creek."

Elk shrugged. "So you say."

"Hell, if I meant to shoot anybody it would've been Gullen after that whuppin' I got, wouldn't it?"

"Seems so, but that's how it is."

"Where were you?"

"Just moving around, cooling off."

"Do you know what I know about Billy?" Johnny asked suddenly.

"Yeah," Elk answered. "I know."

"You s'pose anybody else does?"

"Maybe Brede. I ain't sure. I been watchin' him. I watch her."

"I reckon the three of us better pull out."

"We'd get shot down. Bat Corrin's off there watchin' it."

"We could make it at night."

"Brede would trail us and shoot us down—or hang us."

"I won't take another whuppin'."

"No?"

THEY laid up early. Sid Pocock trailed Brede like a puppy. All the starch had gone out of him. His long horseface was longer than ever. It made even his own Broken Diamond P boys chuckle. As a matter of fact, the whole crew was getting a bang out of the goings-on, because it was no skin off their noses, and they had no illusions about the kind of men they were working for. There wasn't an ounce of plain downright loyalty in any of them, except, perhaps, Gil Hawthorne's Gee Haw hands. It was more like a show to them, with the devil getting his dues.

"It seems to me," Sid suggested, "everybody ought to shuck their guns until we git this cleared up."

"That ain't a bad idea," Brede agreed. "You mean everybody, you and me, too?"

"Hell, no, not me," Sid protested. "I need self-protection. I ain't goin' out after my own hide, am I?"

"Well, I ain't either." Brede said. "You want to remember you ain't the only one got one of them notes. The damn' buzzard might take a notion to mix up his schedule. Where's Bat Corrin?"

"He ain't come in, Brede," Hawthorne said.

"I fetched him a snack," the cook chimed in. "He's goin' to stay off there a spell, he says, and see how things work out."

"Damned yellow-belly," Brede flared. "I expect he's fixin' to run off if you git it, Sid."

Sid wiped his face and got more and more nervous as time ran on and darkness closed in. Brede had his whip in his hand, coiled like a lass rope. "Well, I guess we won't wait for Bat," he announced finally. "Sit down, boys, and we'll go into this."

Except for two men riding herd, and Bat Corrin, the whole crew was in camp. When they were settled in a circle Brede went on, "Most of you are in the clear. It seems like nobody seen anybody put them notes on the end-gate. Snack didn't see it done, and nobody else did. I seen the shot that killed Mel, but when I got there I couldn't find nothin'. But it stands to reason it's somebody who's sittin' right here now. It can't be any other way. I been askin' questions today till I'm blue in the face, but I ain't got nowhere. Now I'll ask once again, and then I'm through talkin'. Do any of you know anything about any of this?"

Johnny glanced at Hawthorne but Gil kept his peace. No one spoke. Brede's bad eye drooped lower as the silence ran on. The last bit of light went out of the sky. "Their guns, Brede," Sid leaned over to say. "You didn't—"

"Shut up," Brede snarled. Then, all at once, his whip snaked out, and the lash curled around Elk's body, pinning his arms to his sides. "Git his gun, Sid," he bellowed, "and then git out yore hangrope. I got this pinned on him good."

As far as Torrell was concerned, it was a surprise move. He had expected Brede's first move to be against himself, or Billy, but after the first start of surprise, he got to his feet and backed off. It was a risky play he meant to make, but he owed it to Elk.

"Stand back, Pocock," he ordered, leveling his gun. "You, Gullen, drop that whip. Don't anybody try anything. Billy, get three horses off the picket line and lead 'em off into the dark."

Brede went for his gun but before he got it out Johnny fired. The bullet struck him in the arm. The big trail boss didn't move after that. Elk got to his feet and shook off the coils of the whip. Billy got three horses and moved them out of the circle of light. Johnny and Elk backed off. Elk's face was gray with fury. His gun bored down on Brede at full cock. "Don't start it, Elk," Johnny warned. "For God's sake, don't!"

Elk didn't answer. Gullen was closer to death right then than he had been when Elk broke up his whipping spree on Johnny. But Johnny talked the half-breed out of it, and kept him moving until the darkness closed in around them. He shouted out a last warning and nobody at the campfire made a move to follow.

"You want me along?" Billy asked uncertainly.

"Sure," Johnny told her. "Climb up."

"I picked the three best horses in the line," Billy said.

"You all ready?"

"Ready," both Elk and Billy answered. "Let's go."

BREDE jumped up the minute he heard the hoofbeats fading off, and barked orders. Five men followed him. Hawthorne and Pocock stayed behind. Sid wilted against the wagon-wheel. "Did you ever see the beat?" he muttered weakly. "Brede knew all the time it was Elk and wouldn't let on."

"Brede's got his own way of doin' things," Gil said.

"You s'pose the three of them are in it together?"

"I don't know."

"What the hell do they want, that's what I'd like to know. What's it goin' to get 'em, killin' us all off?"

Gil pursed his lips. "That new puncher," he remarked finally. "His name's Torrell, Sid. You recollect Nate Torrell, one of them Painter Creek rustlers?"

Sid's jaw dropped. "God in Heaven!" he breathed at last. "That's it."

"It might be," Gil muttered. "I spoken to him about it, but he wouldn't say he was kin. Nate had a boy, I know."

"I must say I'm beginnin' to feel better anyway," Sid stated. "It's a helluva strain, Gil, facin' something like that the whole damn' day. I'm plumb wore out."

"Have a shot of java, Sid," Snack invited, a snicker in his voice.

"You go to hell!" Sid bellowed. "I'd like to see you in a fix like this sometime."

Inside of a half hour two punchers

drifted back. "Damned if I'm goin' to go chasin' all over the place in the dark," one muttered.

"Where's Brede and the rest?" Gil asked.

The puncher shrugged. "I don't know. Everybody got scattered. Crocker and me stuck together."

A little later another drifted back alone and tied up his horse. He probably hadn't gone far. His horse didn't look it. He didn't have anything to say.

"We'll go after 'em in the mornin'," Sid stated, his nerve simmering back. "After all, it's murder—plain, dirty, low-down murder."

"Oh, shut up!" Gil said wearily. "I think I cin stand some of that java, Snack."

Gil and Sid both had a cup. They stood together near the chuckwagon drinking, Gil thinking back to some things he had done, and other things he had left undone in the years gone by, and how, if he had been a little different, he could have held his head a little higher.

Sid leaned his back against the wheel again and lifted the cup to his lips. Then he lurched suddenly. The cup exploded out of his hand and dropped to the ground in a thousand pieces. A rifle *spanged* off in the dark, the sound following the bullet. Sid's face was suddenly bloody, the shattered crockery mug and the ragged bullet tearing his flesh. His arms flailed, grabbing blindly at thin air until his knees gave way and he fell.

CHAPTER THREE

Boothill Pow-wow

BAT CORRIN owned the B C iron and a fair share of the range back on Painter Creek. Like the rest of the owners, he had five hundred head of mixed stock on the drive. He was solidly built, with a short, thick neck that let his oversize chin rest on his chest. His temper was almost as short as Gullen's. There was a time when he had made a grab for all the Painter Creek range, but it had turned out to be more than he could swallow, along with the hot lead that went with it. Now he seemed to have grown contented with what he had. When they had run into a rash of rustling trouble from the small-tally ranchers across the creek, he had stood with the others in wiping them out, and got his fair share of what range they accumulated by that play. Brede Gullen thought he was yellow and it put him clear out of sorts when Bat rode off on what looked like nothing but a lone hand play to save his own life. He wasn't cordial when Bat returned.

"It would've been a fine thing if we'd all rode off, wouldn't it?" Brede grumbled. "You don't give a damn for nothin' except yore own worthless carcass."

"Well," Bat remarked, "if Sid had rid off he might still be alive. That's the way I look at it. But I expect we got to stick together like we always done."

"That sounds nice now when your boots are startin' to pinch."

Pocock's grave was a bleak and dismal thing in this lonely land, where a rain would lose it forever from the sight of man. It made Gil Hawthorne thoughtful and silent, because, at his age, a man looked ahead to see if he could catch a sight of the end of the trail. He recalled that the talk he had had with Sid about the Torrells stood as if it had never been made, because Sid was dead, and all Gil's doubts and misgivings were his own again. But he spoke of it again when the three of them were alone together, repeating what he had told Sid Pocock, and the talk he had had with Johnny Torrell when the two of them had gone out to bury Mel Acaby. "We sure gave Nate Torrell a purty raw deal in some ways, and the thing may be strikin' back at us."

"That thing always did stick in yore craw, didn't it?" Brede snarled. "He was nothin' but a dirty, low-down cow-thief, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, but if this boy is his kin he might not understand it that-away. I always had a hunch Nate Torrell got off alive, and I know he had a youngster who might've growed up by now. Time flies and, I reckon, if Nate Torrell lived, he wasn't a purty sight. You always was one to maim a man and let him run off with enough of himself to make him wish you'd finished the job."

"Nate Torrell got what he had coming," Brede growled.

"Rope-hauling a man over rough ground like you done to him is a terrible thing. He was all smashed to pieces when you

pulled up and let him lay on the ground."

"He didn't let him lay," Corrin put in. "He give him a dose of lead besides, I recollect—a slug in each arm."

"Because the rest of you were too yaller to make a clean sweep of it, that's why!" Brede snapped.

"The only reason I mention it," Gil continued, "is that a youngster could get the wrong slant on a thing like that, and take a notion to get back at us any which way, even to killin' us all off in cold blood. I'm not blamin' you, Brede, for what was done."

"You didn't mind gettin' a share of that range across the creek," Brede reminded him. "And since we're on the subject let me tell you somethin'. You're no lily-white holy-roller yourself, if it comes to that."

"I don't claim to be," Gil answered. "If I was, I'd pick better company."

"I know why you throwed in with the rest of us to wipe out them Painter Creek greasy-sackers."

"I wanted to put a stop to their rustling, that's all. They like to ruined me."

"That ain't all by a long shot," Brede flared. "You recollect Orrie Dobson?"

"Why . . . yes," Gil said softly.

"He's the greasy-sacker you plugged full of lead—you recollect that? He stood there in front of his place with a gun in his hand and let you empty yore gun on him without takin' a shot at you."

"He had a chance."

"You ever try to figure out why he wouldn't take it?"

"No."

"I'll tell you why. It was because he was your own kin."

"Now listen, Brede," Gil said. "You're a damned—"

"It's the truth. He was your son-in-law."

GIL turned white. "This ain't gettin' us nowhere," he muttered. "We got to figure out a way to—"

"That's what I'm doin'," Brede broke in. "You were purty high and mighty in those days, and it didn't suit you to let a greasy-sacker like Dobson marry your daughter, but—"

"He was a rustler," Gil said coldly.

"Okay, but he was your own kin, too. Maybe you don't know it, but I do. Your daughter and him got married on the sly, hopin' to fix things somehow with you later. She stayed with you and he went back to his two-bit layout. But he was your own son-in-law when you killed him, Gil. That's why she ran off when she heard about it, and never came back."

"It isn't true, Brede."

"You claimed she died of plague, but you don't even know where she went to. But I do, and she didn't die of plague. She died in childbirth."

"Stop it!" Hawthorne shouted, his face contorted. He made a move for his gun, but checked it, and his shoulders slumped suddenly. "We got to stick to the point," he went on. "We—"

"That's what I'm doin'," Brede broke in. "You happen to know what that kid wrangler's name is?"

"Why, no—just Billy—Billy—"

"Yeah. Well, I'll tell you. It's Billy Dobson. She's Orrie Dobson's get."

"What do you mean—she?" Gil breathed.

"Hell, man, ain't you got eyes? That wrangler's a girl."

Gil's lips moved, but not a sound came out. His hands shook.

"So, you see," Brede went on, "how this whole thing ties in with that ruckus we had on Painter Creek with Nate Torrell, and Orrie Dobson, and the rest of them greasy-sackers. That's how it stands."

"What about Elk?" Corrin put in.

"He just throwed in with them," Brede stated. "Under-dogs stick together."

"He damn' near killed you last night," Bat observed.

"He's plain loco, that's all."

"I still don't understand how they got Sid," Bat muttered.

"That's plain enough. One of them circled back and let him have it just like they did Mel."

"And what's to stop 'em from coming back tonight and doing me in the same way?"

"I told you. I sent five men out to track 'em down, and we're goin' to stand by here till it's done. You cin crawl in a hole tonight, and pull it in after you, for all I care. I'm doin' all I can."

"That's a helluva way to talk, Brede."

"How d'you want me to talk? You want a fraid-hole, go find one."

"I'm not lookin' for a fraid-hole."

"What did you run off yesterday for?"

"Just to keep an eye on things, that's all.

I had a notion it came from outside, and figured maybe I could stop it. Don't go makin' anything else of it."

"Oh, shut up. You make me sick, tryin' to talk big. In the first place you can't hit the broadside of a barn with a gun, and in the second place—"

"I might surprise you," Bat muttered.

"—and in the second place," Brede went on, "if you could, you wouldn't have the guts to try it. I've seen that before."

"I guess I've got as much as you have any day," Bat sputtered.

"Yeah, you showed that the time you tried to grab off a gob of Painter Creek range." Brede spat at the fire and watched it sizzle, never bothering to look at the man he was baiting. "Damned if we didn't tuck your bushy tail between your legs that time." He laughed harshly.

"You lay off me, Brede. I won't take all that."

Brede spat again. "The times I seen you go yaller would fill a book. Don't tell me!"

BAT CORRIN struggled with his rage. Once his hand edged toward his gun, but Gil saw it and warned him off with a look. It sounded to Gil as if Brede were purposely trying to hurraw Bat into a reckless play, although it might well be plain exasperation that made Brede talk the way he did. At any rate, Bat was no match for the trail boss with a gun, and it would be sheer suicide for him to make the play that lay in the back of his mind.

"The times I seen you back down," Brede went on. "You recollect the time a two-bit gun-hawk braced you in Daley's Saloon in Holly Springs? He spit a chaw of tobaccer in yore face and you turned yore back and walked off."

"Lay off, Brede," Gil put in.

"Damned if I ain't seen you on yore knees to Sid Pocock himself one time when he was galled up about somethin' you done. What kind of a sorry jake are you anyhow?"

Bat didn't answer. Gil's face flushed with shame for the man. If Bat had an ounce of nerve inside of him he ought to get it up now.

"I've whupped you myself with my whup, ain't I?" Brede went on. "That time you got a notion you could grab some range when we wasn't lookin'. I whupped you good and seen you crawl in the dirt and scream yore head off. I seen you just about the sorriest spectacle a man can get, clawin' at my legs to leave off, bellerin' and moanin' like a sick calf."

At last it came. "That's a fact," Bat said, his eyes threaded with fear that showed through his whipped-up nerve like dust through a sun ray, "and I been waitin' a long time to get back at you for it." Then he went for his gun.

Brede Gullen was a fast man with a gun. The scratch Johnny Torrell had given him when he sided Elk the night before might have slowed him down a little. But not much, and Gil could tell he had been expecting Bat to make his play. In all probability he would have kept up the baiting until he did. The only question for him was when it would come. And, at the last moment, Bat lost his nerve again and backed down, swinging his arms wide and throwing them into the air so Brede would hold off. Possibly, Brede didn't see it in time, or, possibly, he chose to ignore it. Gunsmoke leaped out of his hand and a ring of it, whirling off the muzzle, fell to the ground and spread out in a widening circle until it crept back around Brede's legs and broke apart behind him.

Bat Corrin's legs jerked straight ahead of him in a sudden spasm, but that was about all the commotion he made. He tried to keep from falling, swaying like a drunk in a gale. He got out a word or two to Gil. "Now you know how it is," he muttered, thickly, "just like I thought all the time."

Then he went limp and toppled sideways. Brede blew smoke out of his gun, pushed in a fresh cartridge and holstered the weapon. "I never saw the beat," he spoke finally. "A man like that hadn't ought to be allowed to carry a gun, pullin' it on me like that for no reason. What d'you expect he meant by that last crack?"

"I wouldn't know," Hawthorne answered carefully.

"At any rate," Brede remarked, "that'll give our killer friends a day off unless they want to push up their schedule."

Gil made no answer.

"Ain't that right, grandpaw?" Brede went on, a sly grin flicking across his thin lips.

Hawthorne still made no answer.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tale from the Past

JOHNNY TORRELL saw Corrin shot. He stood on a brushy hillside and watched. Billy and Elk were farther back in heavier cover. They hadn't fared too well on their wild run the night before. Elk was in bad shape. His horse had gone into a chuckhole on a dead run and broken its neck. Elk had taken a bad fall. He had climbed aboard with Johnny without help, but later he began to get dizzy spells when he couldn't see, and twice he had gone into a fit that took him close to death. Torrell watched the camp below until he got a careful bird signal from Billy, and then he went back. Elk was breathing evenly. He had his eyes open when Johnny got back. There was a film of sweat on his face. Johnny figured he had concussion, that there was some pressure on his brain that would have to be taken care of before he could be moved. Johnny asked if they had heard the shot.

Billy nodded. "I thought it was you."

Johnny shook his head. "It was Brede Gullen. I saw him kill Bat Corrin."

"So it's still going on," Billy remarked.

"This was different. They were having a private ruckus."

"Did you see Sid Pocock?" Elk asked.

"No. I don't think he's around any more, Elk."

"That leaves only Gil and Brede," Billy observed.

"That's right."

"That's certainly getting to be something," Elk muttered. "Maybe in a couple days there won't be anybody left except the crew."

Johnny knew what Elk was thinking. If they waited a few days they could probably go back down there and make their peace with the crew. But Johnny knew they couldn't wait that long. They didn't have any food and, with Elk on their hands, they couldn't travel and hunt their own.

Billy had a notion she could go down there after dark and talk Snack into giving them a bait of grub and some blankets. She claimed Snack knew she was a girl and hadn't let on, so it appeared he had it in his heart to favor her some.

"It looks to me," Johnny answered, "like just about everybody down there was on to you."

"I guess I'm bigger grown than I had any notion," Billy said, looking herself over with a rather sheepish look.

"I guess so," Johnny agreed. "But if anybody goes down there, I will."

They knew Brede Gullen had sent men out to track them down but it didn't worry them. Staying close in like this from sheer necessity had turned out to be an advantage, throwing the trackers off right from the start.

"Did you see Hawthorne?" Billy asked.

"Yeah, he was there," Torrell answered.

With considerable prodding from Johnny, Billy had told her story, and it was one that began where the one Brede Gullen told Gil Hawthorne had left off. Billy's mother had died when she was born. She had been brought up in a small town near the Border by folks with whom her mother had found refuge. "The reason my mother went down there was because she had heard my pop talk about them, and it was the only place she could think of to go. They were friends of my pop, and they brought me up like their own, but I kept my own name."

"What's your first name?"

"Billy."

"That's some name for a girl," Torrell muttered.

"You can change it if you want to."

"I can't change your first name," Johnny told her.

The implication made Billy's eyes flash. The rest of her story didn't sound so gloomy. "Their name was Mullins," she continued. "When I started to grow up it worried me that my name was different and I asked a lot of questions. But they always edged away from telling me the truth. They wanted to save me from sorrow. But they talked about my pop behind my back. I always pretended I didn't hear, but I found out he had been killed in a gunfight with my own grandpa, and that he had never fired a shot because he didn't want blood on his hands. My pa and mom were only six months married and never had a place of their own. That ruckus between her pa and mine was the reason she ran away and never spoke her own born name again. I don't think even the Mullins knew what it was. But I heard

Painter Creek in their talk, and then when I growed up enough I ran off. Lord forgive me for giving them sorrow. But I had to do it, and I aim to make it up to them. I found Painter Creek. All the range belonged to these pool men. They were fixin' to make this drive so I asked Brede Gullen for a job. I told him my true name but if he ever heard it before he didn't let on. I've been keeping my eyes and ears open, but so far I ain't gotten any closer to the truth than I was the day I came."

"Just what did you mean to do if you found him?" Johnny asked.

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. But I wanted to see my real kin, regardless."

ELK OKICHOB could finish the tale, and he did so, later, to Johnny, in private. He said it was common gossip among Painter Creek punchers, and he was surprised Johnny hadn't heard it before. "It's Hawthorne she's lookin' for," Elk stated. "I don't think he knowed they were married, and Dobson had a gun in his hand, even if he didn't use it. Gil ain't half as ornery as the rest of them pool owners. He's always treated me kindly."

Johnny tried to find out something about his own father, but Elk had never heard the name mentioned. It began to look as if he might never know the truth unless he got it from Hawthorne, who had shown some interest in the name when they had talked together at Mel Acaby's grave. But if Gil was doomed to a bushwhack bullet like the rest of the owners, Johnny didn't stand much chance of finding out who had maimed his father, and bringing the man to account for it.

With Elk's spell showing signs of letting up, Johnny went back to the hillside and stayed there most of the day, watching what went on. Two punchers buried Bat Corrin, and Gil and Brede stood by watching. Johnny tried again to figure out who had sent the death notes. Sid Pocock was surely dead, or he would have shown himself around, unless he had run off during the night. It wasn't likely he had because the horse he usually rode stood in the picket line. Bat Corrin was dead, too, but Brede Gullen had done that, in a private flare-up between the two. It didn't fit in with the rest of the killings. Or was it a piece of the same cloth? The trail boss had gotten one of the death notes himself, but that didn't put him entirely in the clear. He could have sent one to himself to cover his tracks, giving himself last place on the list so he could carry out his plan. The ruckus with Bat Corrin could have been built up to look like a flare-up, when actually it was part of the whole plan.

He tried to figure out what Brede could gain. He could probably cash in on the whole herd, which would make a sizable sum, although the risks hardy seemed to warrant it. He might make himself king of Painter Creek range, wiping out the others with whom he shared it, just as all of them had done before with the small fry across the creek.

The notion settled solidly in Johnny's mind and stayed there, because there was no other way to account for what was going on. In the end, Brede could probably throw all the blame on Elk, and Billy, and himself, and make it stand up, because he had planned it out that way. But Johnny knew they were in the clear and he could think about it differently than the rest of the crew were apt to do.

Later in the day, Brede rode along the hillside all by his lonesome, close enough in so Johnny could have shot him off his horse. Once he stopped and scanned the cover on the hillside for some time. Then he lifted his hand suddenly in a signal and rode on.

"Judas Priest!" Johnny muttered. "He waved at somebody!"

Johnny worked his way along the hillside, keeping to the thickest cover. It took him some time. He moved carefully so he wouldn't make a sound. Most of the cover was young aspen, and the slightest stir in the air set it a-quiver with a loud whisper that served him well. Through an opening, he saw Brede head back to camp. A little later, both Brede and Gil Hawthorne came back, trailing along the foot of the hill the way Brede had done alone.

JOHNNY had the place where Brede had stopped to wave his hand fixed in his mind. The cover played out a little, and he had to be careful. Finally he spotted a man standing alongside a tree. It was Pete Kesso, one of Brede's Lazy Bell punchers. He looked something like Brede, but he wasn't as big. He had a boil on his neck

that canted hise head to one side. Whatever his chore was up here, he didn't seem to be in a cheerful frame of mind about it. His nerves were jumpy, and he was biting the back of his hand with his teeth. A saddle carbine hung in the crook of his arm.

Johnny circled up the hill, then drifted down and came at Brede's stake-out from behind—just in time to see Kesso lift the carbine and take aim. Johnny had a clear view straight down the hill. Gil and Brede were standing at the foot, a little apart. Brede was motioning at something and making talk. It looked like his way of getting Gil under the stake-out's gun. Pete had his weapon lined up on Gil ready to shoot him down.

"Freeze, Pete," Johnny warned, in a voice just loud enough for the puncher to hear. "I'll blow that boil right off the back of your neck. Ease that gun down. Don't raise any commotion."

Pete cussed, but he was careful, careful of his boil, and his back. He did what Johnny told him to in slow motion.

"Put it right down on the ground and then back off this way. Don't trip yourself. Get rid of your hand gun, too. Be careful."

"For the love of Mike, you, too?" Pete asked.

"Just watch it, that's all," Torrell told him.

"Don't touch my boil."

"I didn't know you were Brede's gun hawk."

"Well, you wouldn't expect me to go shootin' off my mouth about it, would you?"

"Does Brede know Elk and the wrangler and I holed up here on the hill?"

"Sure he does. He sent those trackers out just for show."

"What are you here for—to croak Gil, or keep an eye on us?"

"A little of both, mebbe. You see, if Gil got croaked along the hill here, Brede could lay the whole thing onto you. That's why he ain't flushed you out. Brede's purty bright."

"Yeah, he is, in a dirty kind of way."

"Brighter'n you, Johnny. If you used that gun on me he'd be up here in two jerks."

"He might, or he might think you were taking a crack at Gil. He'd think you were a helluva poor shot, too."

Pete shrugged, wincing when it put a kink in his boil. Brede was keeping up his palaver at the foot of the hill, waiting for Pete to go into action. Gil started to move but Brede brought him to a stop again with more talk.

Shot, or no shot, Johnny figured Brede would come up the hill. It was what he wanted, because it was time for talk, plain talk or gun talk, Johnny didn't care which. But he had to manage it so Brede wouldn't have too much bulge. He had to keep Pete Kesso out of it. He didn't have any rope to tie him up, but he could pull his fangs. With that boil on his neck Pete wouldn't crave any action except gun action. Without a gun he wouldn't side Brede, if it came to a showdown.

Johnny walked in, and threw the rifle into the bushes. Then he did the same with the revolver. Convinced that Pete wouldn't start anything, he probably wasn't as careful as he should have been. Probably Pete would have made his try anyway. At any rate, in the split second he was off-guard Pete Kesso moved. Johnny saw the flash of sunlight on steel. Then a knife went hilt-deep into his arm. His hand went numb and his gun dropped to the ground. He tried to recover it with his good hand but before he could get it into play Pete jumped him and Johnny went to the ground.

Pete scooped up the gun, but Johnny kicked out and caught Pete in the face with his boot. Pete went reeling back, his face convulsed with agony, his arms flailing. The gun went sailing through the air and landed in the bushes. Johnny saw where it went, but it was too far off to get at. He tried to pull out the knife. It had gone in near the elbow. When he twisted his arm pain raced clear down to his toes. He got it half way out but before he could finish the job Pete same in again and he had to let it go.

PETE was a savage fighter. The boil had popped. Johnny could see blood and ooze sliding down his neck. Maybe it was a relief. Pete had gotten his head straightened out. It wasn't canted to one side now. Johnny's boot had caught him on the side of the jaw, leaving a ragged bruise that reached to his ear. It had taken out a tooth that left a big gap in the front of his mouth. He used his boots until

Johnny ached from head to foot. He stamped down on the knife and drove it back hilt-deep into Johnny's arm.

But Johnny finally found his feet and gave Pete a punch that rocked his head sideways and almost knocked him cold. It slowed Pete up considerably. For some time he was stumbling around in a daze. Johnny got out the knife and threw it away. He wanted no part of a thing like that, to take, or to use. He got in another blow straight to Pete's stomach, and another to his chin, both with the same fist. Pete spun away, spewed and gagged. Johnny kicked him from behind and he went down head-first, leaving half his shirt on a broken branch that raked him the full length of his spine.

Johnny went after him into the bushes. Pete had twisted over. He had a stone the size of his fist in his hand. Johnny didn't see it. He jumped Pete on all fours. His good hand went for Pete's throat. He got a good grip. Then Pete brought up the stone, and drove it square into the middle of Johnny's forehead.

Johnny went limp and toppled sideways. He swirled down into black shadows, flecked with blobs of golden light that came and went like heat lightning in the sky at night. He had no idea how long it lasted. When he finally got his eyes open again he was looking straight into the muzzle of Brede Gullen's gun.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kill-Crazy

GIL HAWTHORNE was there too. His holster was empty, his eyes smouldering with helpless rage. From the looks of things Gil had come up the hill with a gun in his back. Pete Kesso lay on the ground in the middle of the small clearing. He looked worse off than Johnny, although the growing lump on Johnny's forehead was no beauty spot. Pete must have passed out the same time he did, and was taking longer to come to.

Brede had his bull whip. He moved back and gave Pete a cut across the face with the lash. Pete winced and squirmed, and let out a yelp, but he didn't try to get up.

"I thought you was foolin', you dirty little stinker," Brede muttered. "Why don't you tend to yore knittin'?"

Pete rolled on his side, his back to Brede. He didn't answer. Brede gave him another flick that picked flesh off his back, and drew another yelp, but he still had no answer to make. He huddled in a ball and tried to protect himself.

Next, Brede turned on Johnny and curled the whip around the toe of his boot. Partly covered by the low-hanging greenery the way Johnny was, Brede probably hadn't seen his eyes come open. He didn't know Johnny could see what was going on, although it probably wouldn't have made any difference to the ornery trailboss. He dragged Johnny a foot out of the brush with his handy whip, then lifted it free. "You get over there, Gil," he ordered.

Gil moved closer to Johnny, wiping his face with his sleeve. He was breathing hard after the long pull up the hill on foot. "For God's sake, get it over with, man," he muttered.

"Don't rush me!" Brede flared back. "If Pete had done his chore right I wouldn't need to go to all this bother."

"I don't see why you do now," Gil told him.

"It's got to look right, don't it? I had it planned so Pete would croak you from down there. Then he'd clear out, and we'd flush Torrell and his two pals out of their hole-up on the hill, and give 'em a piece of hangrope. Pete loused that up, but I cin still make out okay. I want it to look like a shoot-out between you and Torrell, Gil. You both git it, and that keeps me in the clear in all directions. The killer gits croaked before he cin git to work on me." Brede gave Gil a pleased grin.

Johnny heard the same soft bird call Billy had used before, and he began to fret and worry. Maybe Elk was throwing another fit. Maybe Billy was out looking for him because he stayed away so long. If she stumbled onto this place, she would be as bad off as he was, probably worse. His head began to clear, however, and he took note of his surroundings. His body was out in the open, but his head and arms were still under cover. The aspen leaves twisted and turned and made a frantic game of throwing the sunlight back and forth at each other. Closer to the ground he suddenly noticed a sharper glint. He turned

his head carefully and saw the gun Pete had thrown away when he got Johnny's boot in his face. It was out of reach but in a pinch he could make a try for it.

"I s'pose I should've been expectin' this," Gil remarked, "the way you badgered Bat Corrin into that shoot-out. You knew he wasn't worth a hoot with a gun."

"You could've figured it out long ago if you had any brains," Brede told him. "I wasn't around when Mel Acaby got it, was I? You thought I was over to the bed ground, but I wasn't. The same with Sid Pocock. You thought I was chasin' Torrell, and Elk, and the kid wrangler. I was, till I seen Elk take a header and seen them head for this hill. I knew they'd hole up here, so I came back and let Sid have it."

It was a cold-blooded brag, like a mad dog licking his chops. The sound of it, more than the meaning, made Gil sick to his stomach. "I expect the reason is you want to cash in on the herd all by your lonesome," he muttered.

"That's only part of it," Brede went on. "I got lots of plans. When I get through with you and this Torrell whelp I'll be the big augur on Painter Creek range, you realize that, Gil? We'll hang Elk, just for show, and I got a notion rattlin' around in the back of my mind that if the wrangler put on some purty clothes she's a right good-looker. You see what I mean, Gil? Hell, you and me'll be kin. Maybe she and I'll take over your home place, Gil."

JOHNNY heard the bird signal coming closer, soft and sweet, with frills and warbles, like a catbird turning handsprings with joy. But, with what he had heard from Brede Gullen, it put a tight knot in the pit of Johnny's stomach.

"You must've been thinkin' this out a long time, Brede," Gil remarked, as if he were curious to know just how mad a mad dog could get.

"You don't know the half of it," Brede Gullen went on with his brag. "Hell, I been thinkin' on it ten years, even way back there when we cleaned out them greasy-sackers across Painter Creek." He laughed suddenly. "Them jakes never rustled none of your stock, Gil. I done it, and planted it on them."

This time, Gil's face went dead white. "I—I don't believe that," he got out finally.

"It's a fact, and that includes Orrie Dobson, too," Brede jeered. "Hell, he never had the guts to rustle stock."

"It—it ain't true," Gil whispered. "You went in there yourself and shot 'em down like the rest of us."

"Sure. Why not?"

"I recollect the way you went after Nate Torrell, ropehauling him till your horse tuckered, then giving him a dose of lead. I couldn't stomach it, even if he was a rustler, but you knowed all the time he wasn't. What kind of a man are you, anyway?" Gil's voice went up, loaded with as much shock and horror as if what he was talking about had happened only yesterday.

Brede laughed again. "I never could stomach that jasper, no better'n I cin stomach that whelp of his'n there on the ground. I only hired him so as to make this thing work out, and look right."

The Painter Creek trail boss let his whip snake out again and Johnny steeled himself to stand it. But Brede aimed it at Pete Kesso, and it brought the tough gun-hawk to his feet. "If I had a gun I'd kill you," he muttered. "I should've done it long ago."

What he said cost him another blow with the whip. "Now fog it," Brede ordered. "Don't ever cross my tracks again, or you won't live to get out of sight. I'm givin' you a break, at that, and you better remember it."

Pete pulled out a-foot down the hill. He didn't have any more to say. He was about the sorriest-looking sight Johnny had ever seen, a-foot or on horseback.

Johnny didn't hear Billy again. Brede's brag roiled his blood and brain almost beyond endurance, but he had to wait it out. Brede was watching him too close to make a move, and when Pete got out of sight, he came in closer, and gave him a prod with his boot. Johnny let his legs roll limply and kept his eyes shut.

"His gun ought to be around here somewhere," Brede muttered. "He's got to have a gun to make it look like a shoot-out between the two of you."

Brede's prod brought Johnny a little closer to the weapon, but not quite close enough. And another worry started to nag him. Suppose he got hold of it, and then found he didn't have the strength to use it. He felt weak as a cat, even when he was

lying down, and if he popped up suddenly he might go completely under again. He had to hold off as long as he could and get his wits and strength back.

Brede covered the ground, looking for a weapon. He came closer again and pushed aside the twigs that covered Johnny with his free hand, while he kept an eye on Gil, who still looked too shocked and stunned to make a move.

Johnny hadn't heard Billy's signal for some time, and hoped it meant she had gone back. She wouldn't be apt to have a gun. She hadn't had the last time she had come down to get him.

Brede worked his way down through the greenery. All at once he froze, and Johnny knew he had found the gun. He had half a notion to try to grab it out from under the trail boss' nose, but he knew it wouldn't work. Brede started to reach down, then stopped again. This time it was Billy who stopped him. Johnny couldn't see her. She stayed out of sight but she ordered Brede to throw up his hands, just when his hand started to close around the gun on the ground.

BREDE'S free hand went up, then he lunged sideways behind some screening and fired at the sound of Billy's voice. Billy didn't fire back. It turned out later she didn't have a gun. She was running a bluff, hoping Johnny could make something of it. Johnny's first shot plowed into the ground under Brede's nose, and sent up a plume of dust. Left-handed shooting wasn't the best way to make his lead count, but he knew he couldn't use his right hand.

Gil stood flat-footed between the two. Brede's shot took him in the side and threw him down. Gil didn't move again but Johnny judged he knew what was going on. Johnny's second shot clipped Brede's shoulder and flattened him out on the ground. The quivering of the leaves interfered with both of them. Brede took another shot, then rolled and put distance between them. Billy let out a yell, threatening him from behind. He didn't know she was bluffing and he wasted a shot on her.

Johnny hit him in the leg and brought him to his knees. They were firing across Gil again, who spread himself as thin as possible and didn't try to move. Brede took another bullet in the chest. Another skinned Johnny's cheek. Then Brede suddenly took a notion to finish off Gil. His bad eye almost closed, his other glared with malevolent fury. "In spite of hell, I'll croak you," he bellowed.

He didn't finish his threat, and he didn't get off the shot. The last shot Johnny had in his gun finished what the one in the chest began. It struck Brede a hard, solid blow, shattering flesh and bone, and flung him in a lifeless heap to the ground.

Billy came into the open, empty-handed, and she went straight to Johnny. "I called and called," she told him in a shaky voice. "I—I—I—" Then she put her face in her hands and started to cry.

"I heard it," Johnny said. "It was very pretty." It was a way of talking that Johnny hoped would save her her tears, but it didn't. He could hear her sniffling now. "Judas Priest!" he exclaimed, taking a different tack. "Everything's all right!"

"I know it, but I—I thought everybody was going to get killed."

"That's nonsense. I'm all right. My head aches, is all. What about Elk?"

"He's all right. That's what I came to tell you. He's out of the fog."

"How about you, Gil?" Johnny called.

"I'm okay I guess. What I got here ain't bad," Gil answered.

Johnny turned back to Billy. "You see? There's nothing to weep about."

"Well, I—I get overcome. After all, I'm only a girl, and—"

"And that makes it perfect," Johnny said, pulling her down beside him and putting his arm around her shoulder.

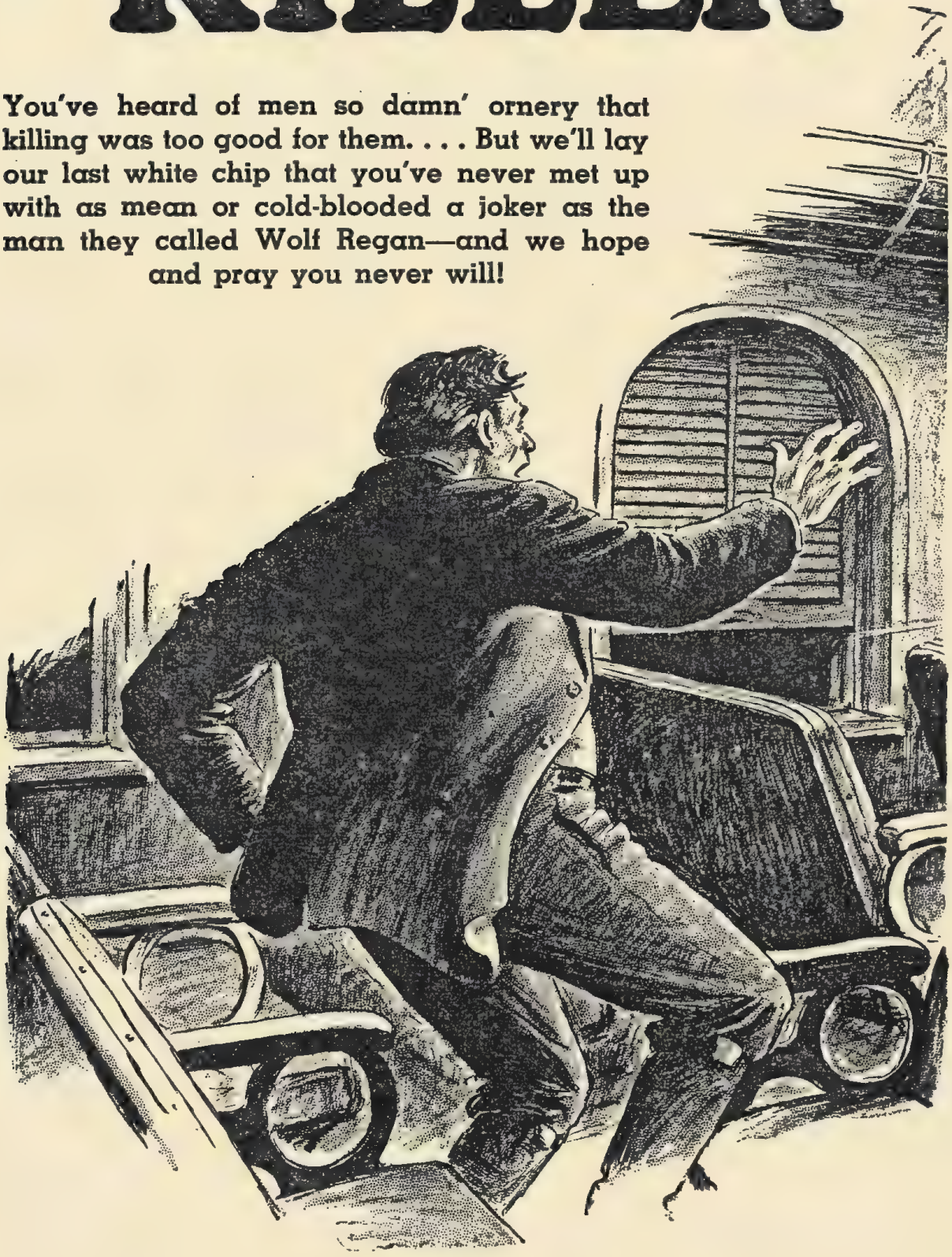
Gil Hawthorne watched and thought what a nice thing it would be for him if he could set these two up in the Gee Haw ranchhouse. She was his kin and he could try to make amends. Just looking at them sitting there that way, he knew he wasn't getting too far ahead of himself in his thinking.

THE END

Now is the time to reserve your copy of MARCH *STAR WESTERN*—on sale Feb. 11!

KILLER

You've heard of men so damn' ornery that killing was too good for them. . . . But we'll lay our last white chip that you've never met up with as mean or cold-blooded a joker as the man they called Wolf Regan—and we hope and pray you never will!



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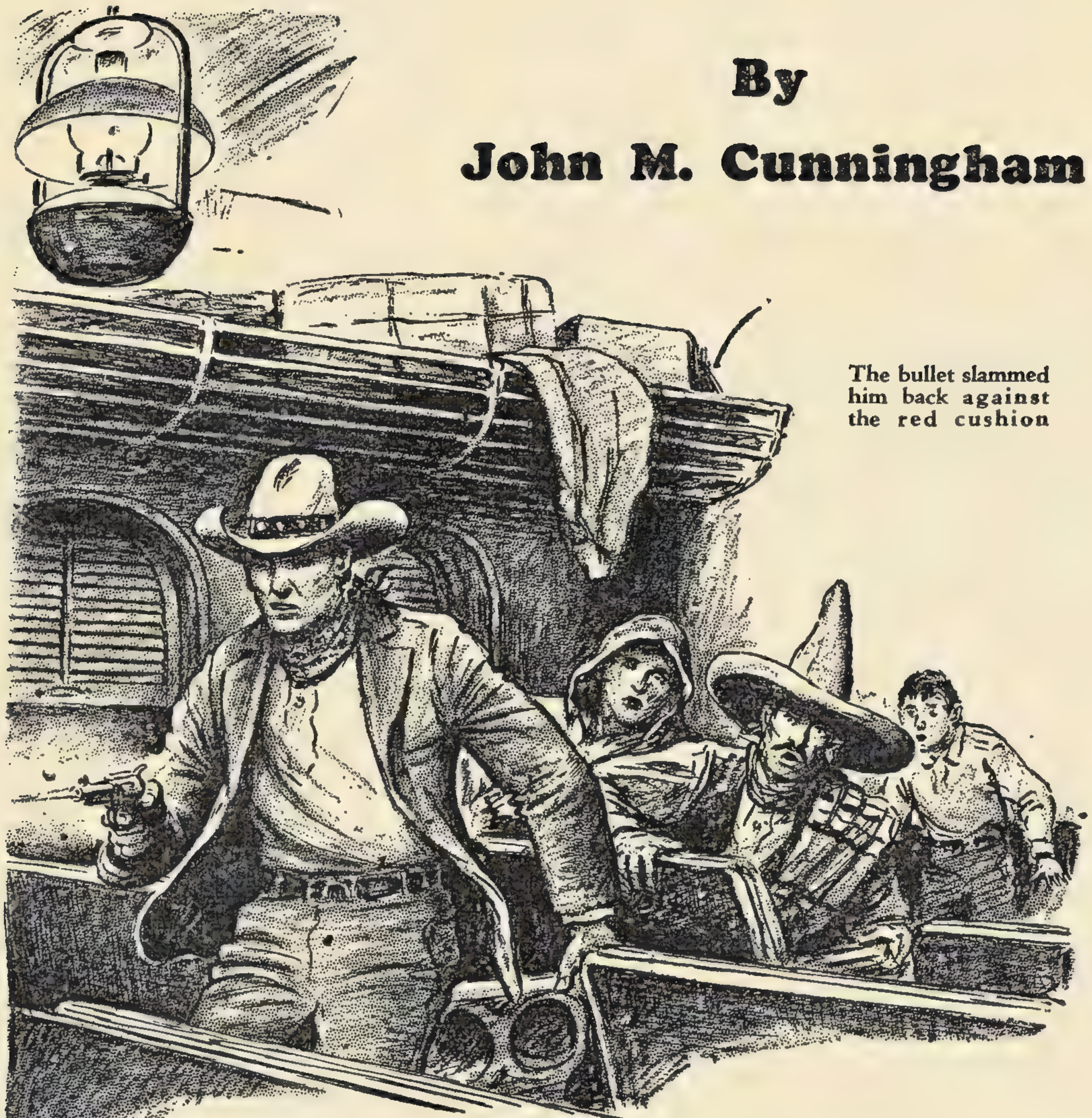
John M. Cunningham



The bullet slammed him back against the red cushion

CHAPTER ONE

The Little Yellow Dog

THE TWO ARMED guards sat on one grimy, red-plush seat, facing the engine. One of them was asleep. The other sat smiling like a cat at the prisoner opposite him, who was riding backward and staring hungrily out at the plain.

"It's only eighty miles to the Border." The watching guard grinned maliciously as the prisoner painfully changed the position of the irons on his wrists. "How'd you like to be riding a horse out there?"

The yellow-flamed kerosene lamps swaying from the ceiling of the coach sent a weak glow through the grimy windows out onto the snowbound prairie as it sped past. Bright woodsparks from the engine up ahead streamed back across the black, ominous sky.

"How about it, eh?" the guard asked. "It ought to be easy to get away. You only got two guards, me and Jim here." He jerked his head sideways at the other deputy, a small, round man who sat slumped against the window, his mouth open and emitting weak snores, barely audible in the bedlam of groans, squeaks, clattering wheels and

crashing couplings that filled the rushing, swaying car. At the far end a large family of Mexicans lolled asleep, their heads rolling with the swing of the train. The rest of the coach was empty.

"Wolf," the big guard said, smiling fixedly at the prisoner, his small, beady eyes, amber in color, tireless on the pale, thin face. "Why don't you take a crack at me, Wolf? I'm soft. I'm easy."

The prisoner continued to stare out the window. His small, smooth, boyish face was pale with exhaustion. The goading had been going on for hours. There was innocence and gentleness in the mouth, and innocence in the sad, appealing eyes.

"A grand, fierce animal," the big guard said, relishing his diction. "A wild, noble beast." He began to laugh internally, the spasms shaking the bunched, muscular chest and making his face redder. "A fine wolf you are, Wolf Regan. You lousy yellow dog."

Regan looked down at his hand-cuffed wrists. The deputy pulled out a fat gold watch, looked at it and began jabbing his partner with his elbow. "You'll be having a wonderful time in Yuma, Wolf. Wait till those brother wolves up there have a chance at you." His eyes were grinning. "I guess the judge thought he was being merciful, giving you life instead of hanging you. By God, I'd rather hang fifteen times than be left to the mercy of some of those old cons in Yuma, after what you done."

The sleeping guard woke slowly and rubbed his eyes open. He felt under his coat for his gun.

The big one rose stiffly. "I'm going for coffee in the caboose, Jim," he said. "Keep your eyes on Wolf here. He might bite you." He laughed and patted the prisoner on the shoulder. "Wolf, hell! When those old wolves in Yuma get at him, he'll howl like what he is, the little yellow dog." He staggered down the aisle between the rusty red plush seats, bracing himself against the sway and heave of the car.

"He been ribbing you again?" the deputy asked. There was something like kindness in his red-rimmed eyes.

The prisoner looked down, his face pinched with shame, mute and meek.

The other was silent a moment, his eyes gentle on the prisoner's humble face. "We're coming into your home town in a minute, Wolf. You want me to pull down the shades, in case any of your old friends are still up?"

The prisoner shook his head a little.

"It's going to be rough in the pen," Jim said. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

The prisoner raised his eyes diffidently. "There's just one thing," he said in a very low, hesitant voice, as though afraid to speak up too boldly. He turned his palms up and held out his two hands toward the deputy. The insides of his wrists were chafed raw by the rusty iron.

"It hurts bad," the prisoner said. "If you could just please take them off for a little while. I swear to God I'll be good. Just a little while. It hurts like hell."

Jim looked up, scrutinizing the other's eyes. "I shouldn't do it, kid. It's against the rules."

The prisoner's eyes slowly filled with tears. He looked away hurriedly, wiping the wet away with the back of his wrist.

JIM fingered a key out of his pocket. "Somehow you don't seem like the kind to kill your own buddy, just for that lousy roll you had between you. Why'n hell didn't you stick up another bank, the both of you? It wasn't the first time." He reached forward with the key and stuck it into the lock of the left cuff. "Things never get that tough in this country that you have to kill. Some of these Mexicans around here will give you the shoes off their feet if you ask for it."

He unlocked the cuffs. The prisoner sat with head hanging meekly, his face sad.

Jim sat back, reached for a small cardboard box on the seat beside him. He untied the string neatly and carefully, wrapped it around his finger and stuck it into his vest pocket. "My wife, she's a great one for saving string," he said. He held out the box and the prisoner took a leg of fried chicken out of it. "Thanks," he said, his voice choked. He fell to gnawing it, huddled in the corner against the window, staring out.

Ahead a faint prick of light showed across the frozen plain, and the train began to swing toward it. Slowly other lights glimmered out of the dark and grew larger. The train jarred and rolled with a grind as brake shoes tightened.

"Kid, you'll find some feller in that pen that's worse off than you are, believe it or

not. The judge had mercy on you. Pass it on. That's a principle of mine."

The train lurched as the brakes began their long grind, and dim yellow windows began to flash by as it entered the town. The train heaved again and slowed to a lumbering roll.

"Pass it on, he gave you a break. Pass it on."

The prisoner turned to the deputy, a small, pitying smile on his own mouth. One hand closed on the idle handcuffs and with the speed of a striking snake he sprang out of the corner, slashing and flailing the cuffs across the deputy's mouth, with his right fist smashing him back against the seat. Jim struggled frantically as Regan fell on him, fighting for the gun under his arm. The prisoner got it and ripped it out of the shoulder holster, springing back, fast, crouching in the aisle.

The deputy pulled himself up together on the seat, his eyes fixed on the gun as the train ground slowly to a halt. His eyes went to the prisoner's. The Wolf eared back the hammer of the gun.

"Don't do it," Jim said sharply. "I warn you, if you do me in you'll get it worse than you ever dreamed of. Hanging ain't nothing to what you'll get."

The train was barely rolling, coming toward the center of the town. The bell clanged faintly over the rush of steam ahead.

"I've got a wife," Jim said, his eyes begging. "Go on, escape. But I've got a wife. I've got kids. My God, have mercy on the kids anyway."

Regan smiled. "You dirty, rotten hounds," he said in a low, strong voice. "You and that judge. You think you're so neat. You and your mercy. I'll give you your mercy. They don't call me Wolf for nothing."

The deputy started to throw himself at the gun as it crashed, and the bullet slammed him back against the red cushion. He sat quiet, his head lolling sideways, his eyes dim. The train groaned and shuddered, creeping into the yards.

His voice was strangled. "Mercy, mercy." His back arched away from the seat and his eyes closed; he collapsed suddenly and his body rolled down onto the floor.

Regan backed away down the aisle. The Mexicans in the far end of the car peered at him over their seats, their eyes wide with fear. He slammed a shot at them and turned, running for the end of the car. The night air hit him like the breath of death and he huddled together as he shoved out onto the little platform. He let himself down the four narrow steps, looked up and down the side of the train, and as the engine chuffed slowly into the flood of lights at the station, dropped silently off into the shadows and disappeared down an alley.

HE RAN through the sleeping town, the barking of dogs following his flight down dirty-snowed alleys between dark buildings. He came to a livery stable and began frantically attacking the hasp on the doors, using the barrel of the deputy's gun as a lever.

Then other dogs began to bark in other quarters and he stopped, panting, in the shadow of the livery doorway, his face sweating and his fingers stiff with cold. The voices of men rose faintly, calling and querying, and the sound of horses beating through the slush of the streets, and everywhere the sharp, frantic yelping of the dogs. He shrank farther into the shadow, holding the gun ready in his right hand.

Looking out of the mouth of the alley, he saw a drunk staggering down the boardwalk along a broader street. Two men on horses, tearing down the middle of the road, pulled up abruptly and covered the drunk, yanked off his hat, cursed disappointedly and let him go. They tore off toward the south, leaving the drunk bewilderedly staring after them.

Regan turned and again attacked the hasp. Somebody inside cried out as he ripped the screws from the wood and pushed into the dark, smelly stable. A Mexican with a lantern in one hand and a knife in the other faced him, his serape a blaze of color in the golden light. He saw Regan's gun and dropped his knife, backing away as Regan advanced. His face came into the light and the Mexican's mouth opened with fear.

"No, no—" he began, and Regan fired. He fell on his face. Regan put on the serape and big straw sombrero. The stable office was in the front. He ran to it and broke open the roll-top desk. In one of the pigeon holes he found a pack of two hundred dollars in small bills and stuffed them into his pockets. He quickly saddled one of the

horses and rode it out, singing and swaying in the saddle.

Four blocks away two horsemen stopped him, edging up cautiously with guns ready.

"What's your name?" one asked, his white face grim in the moonlight.

"Perdone, señor?" Regan asked, swaying unsteadily.

"A damn' drunk," the other said. "A damn tomcatting Mex."

"Perdone me, señor?" Regan asked obsequiously. They turned disgustedly and resumed their patrol.

From the edgs of town he looked back, smiled briefly and turned south.

CHAPTER TWO

Sanctuary

THE whole plain, flat as a lake under its pall of snow, burned rose with dawn as he reached the edge of the desert thirty miles south. His face was pinched with hunger as he looked over the flat, forbidding expanse of snow. He drew the gun he had taken from the deputy and opened the cylinder. All but two of the cartridges were spent. He went on and came up out of a wash. Ahead of him was a low dobe box of a house.

A second deep wash cut the plain in front of him, and he rode along it until he came to a small rickety bridge. He forced the horse across it, peering down twenty feet into the cut below.

At the house there was an old Mexican already up, feeding chickens in a tumble down coop, and a woman laboriously winding a bucket of water up out of a well. Gray smoke curled high from a rusty chimney, and he could smell the sharp scent of piñon in the cutting air.

He rode on, fixing a smile on his face. It was a weak, piteous smile, and his body drooped in the saddle wearily. He coughed a few times, weakly, holding one cold-blued hand to his mouth.

The man and the woman stared at him as he came up, their brown eyes moving with faint alarm over his hat and serape, over the horse and saddle.

He dismounted without speaking, went down on one knee and, with great effort, hauled himself erect, by the stirrup leather. He stood swaying slightly and passed his hand over his eyes.

"Please—help me—I am sick. I am starving. Help me. I am sick."

The old woman's face slowly brightened with a smile and she looked at Regan pityingly.

"Pobrecito. He is sick, Peregrino, a sick man. He is to stay."

Regan smiled a weak smile of relief and the old man's face lost its last trace of hostility. His wide Indian mouth expanded into a calm, serene smile.

"I am Peregrino. You are welcome. You come in." He took Regan's arm. "He is thin, mamacita, he is sick, we fix him." He drew Regan through the low door and he stood choking in piñon smoke.

"You sit down, be warm, we fix you some good beans. Everything, all our house, she is yours, amigo. Mamacita! *Pulque, un vaso de pulque.*" He turned grinning from the bean pot. "*Pulque* for the blood. You are frozen. The *pulque* of Peregrino, she will make you on fire quick." He laughed heartily.

Regan let himself relax in the woven-rawhide chair, let the shudders of cold pass through him and away in the heat of the room. The old brown hand set a glass of colorless liquor, trembling at the brim, on the table in front of him, and he lifted it to his mouth. His eyes wept with smoke and his mouth burned with the liquor, and then after a moment, he sighed deeply, sitting back, and looked around the room. The place was crammed with beds and furniture. Dirty Navajo blankets were hung over the windows and doors. An old Spencer rifle hung on one wall. Children came out of corners, stared at him and then scuttled for the door. A small, brown woman, younger than either Peregrino or his wife, came out shyly and followed the children.

The old man sat down at the table across from Regan and watched him with grave, friendly eyes, his broad, lipless mouth still smiling. Under the steady gaze, Regan shifted around in his seat.

"Is all right," the old man said in a low voice, nodding complacently to himself. "Have no fear." He smiled at the two sores on Regan's wrists, and Regan tried to hide them. "Is all right," Peregrino repeated. "Here is only friends. For many times, friends they go quiet to the south. We have many friends. The yonquis, for to steal un peso, they put me in the prison all my life.

Is all right, amigo. You are welcome here, this is your home." He nodded gravely, smiling. "You go to Mexico?"

Regan looked at him steadily. "I am sick. That is all. Just sick. You understand?"

Peregrino looked back curiously for a moment and then shrugged. "Is all right. Only sick. You stay here, we feed you good, amigo." He got up and shuffled over to the bean pot.

REGAN sat still, his face stiff, looking around the walls. The ladle in the old man's hand clinked as he dished out beans into tin plates.

"I am sick," he said suddenly. "You understand that?"

"Is all right," Peregrino said placatingly. "You rest. We are friends here."

With an effort, Regan controlled himself and forced himself to eat the beans the old man set in front of him. The young woman herded the children in and all of them ate.

"How far is Mexico?" Regan asked finally.

Peregrino looked up at the smoke-blackened ceiling, as though counting the log rafters.

"You ride two days, always south. Then the big river, the Rio Grande. Then is Mexico. You go to Dos Pinos. Is good town." He leaned forward. "In the winter, the wolf is very bad. Two men is better for the night, on this plain. We get you friend to go with you."

Regan laid down his spoon, his face pinched. "I am just sick, I tell you. I am not going to Mexico. Why do you always ask me where I am going and what I am going to do? I am not going to Mexico."

Peregrino smiled. "Is all right, amigo. Be with peace. We your friends."

Regan put his two hands on the edge of the table as though to get up. "I don't want any—" he started to shout, and then, bowing his head, bit his teeth together.

"Ah, probecito," the old woman began, half-rising, "is seek. Peregrino, be quiet."

The old man patted his shoulder, mumbling apologetically. The glass of pulque came back, brimming again. The old brown hand gently laid a newspaper beside the glass.

"Aqui, here, amuse yourself. You can read. All will be quiet."

Regan stared at the paper. Slowly the headline focused, and he saw his name. Convicted. Sentenced to Life. Reward uncollected. He looked up quickly at the old woman. She was smiling gently as she scrubbed the pans with sand and water. His eyes flashed to the old man. He was burrowing in an old burlap sack for something.

"You read English?" he snapped.

"English? Me? Read?" He croaked with laughter. "Not for me. I am simple man, poor, ugly. I know nothing."

Regan looked at them, his eyes narrow. The old man pulled a small white jar out of the sack and came over to him, unscrewing the cap.

"Does anybody ever come out here?" he asked sharply. "This paper is only a week old. Who comes out here?"

Peregrino sat down and scooped a gob of salve from the jar with his blunt forefinger. "The arm, let me fix," he said. "Be with peace, amigo. You only friends here. I fix these arm."

Eyeing him narrowly, Regan let him spread the salve on his wrists.

"Who comes out here, I said?"

The old man made a soothing sound with his mouth. "Is big cattle ranch east from here. Sometimes vaqueros come by."

Regan's eyes jerked to the blanketed door.

"Sometimes they hunt the wolf on the plain, they come here for *pulque,* is all. Good friends."

Regan's eyes snapped back to him. "What's that about a wolf?"

The old brown eyes came up a little. "They hunt the wolf, is all. Many wolf on the plain. Bad, many loco, sick—crazy. Not afraid of people. Is money for catch the wolf." He grinned. Regan shoved his chair back sharply. Peregrino looked at him with amazement.

REGAN stood trembling. "So is money for catch the Wolf. You dirty, lousy son, you can't read English, can you? You lousy, stinking brownskin, you are the friend, aren't you? Ten thousand to one you sent somebody in for the law already, you bloody old devil." He ripped aside the serape and snatched out his gun, held it trembling on the old man. The old woman stood stunned, staring at him with one tin pan frozen in her hand, dripping sand and

water on the dirt floor, afraid to move.

"Give me some food!" he yelled at her. "Fix a sack of food, and hurry up about it!" He stepped quickly to the door and yanked the blanket aside. Beyond the little bridge, beyond the wash, the plain lay dull gray under cold, dark clouds. The air was like frozen iron, sinking through to the bone like the edge of an axe.

He turned back, the gun steady.

"Señor," Peregrino quavered. "We have only a little food. Only a little more, for all of us. Señor, you have eat of the last."

"That's too damned bad for you! Hurry up!"

The old woman's face was wooden, all alarm and all surprise gone. In the blankness of her face, her old eyes were sharp and steady on Regan, taking in the half-wild, smoky light of his eyes, the thin face and the tightness of his grip on the gun.

"Silence, Peregrino. El Señor wishes for food. We give only kindness here. Give him our food. In the sack."

The old man's face was still addled with shock. He shuffled unsteadily to the sack in the corner, emptied it on the floor with a shower of old bits, buttons, tin cups and other junk. The woman lifted a square wooden box from a shelf and poured a few handfulls of beans into it. After them went a stack of cold tortillas and from one of the rafters she yanked down some shreds of jerky.

"Pobrecito," she said, advancing toward Regan. She was calm, her eyes knowing and not unkind. "Is sick. Take, señor. All is yours."

At her gesture, Peregrino took a deep breath and the rattled look passed from his face.

"Si," he said. "Amigo, go with peace. We have left the burro. We get food in town."

Regan took the sack in his left hand, and the shaking began again as they watched him. There was nothing in their faces now but pity as they stood still, composed and old.

He thrust the gun at the newspaper. "You see that, you lying old dogs? You stand there and pretend you don't know who I am?"

A small frown of perplexity at his words crossed their faces. Peregrino shook his head and shrugged. "Señor, you speak too fast. What is it you want now that we have got? For such a one as you, we give what we got. Such a one as you needs much."

Hoofs sounded in the yard and, with the beginning of a cry, Regan whirled to the door. He yanked the blanket aside and looked out, his gun ready. In the yard a small burro was trotting a circle, one child on its back, one beating it behind and the third leading it by its halter.

He turned back in, breathing a little fast, his eyes dull with fatigue.

"The hell with you both. I know all this smooth talk. Get me out of here fast and then take off on that burro to town. Like hell."

He went to the wall and yanked down the rifle. He grabbed the bottle of *pulque* off the table and with the sack and the old gun in one hand, strode to the door.

Peregrino rushed after him. "Señor! Please, the gun, leave it, please. For the wolf, the wolf come for the sheep. Is loco, very bad. We must have the gun!"

"For the wolf, is it, so you can take a shot at my back? You muckling old liar," Regan said. "So you can't read English, is it? You're just too damn smart for your own good, sticking that paper in front of my face. You and your damned burro. We'll see how far you get to town. We'll see."

He stepped back. "Just to play it safe, Peregrino, I'll shoot you in the leg. Just in case you should get the idea to walk to town."

Peregrino stood holding his hands together before his face. "Please, señor! Do not shoot me, I must take care of the little ones, señor! Have mercy!"

Regan pulled the trigger and the old man fell in the sudden burst of smoke and flame. He sat on the floor, cries of pain humming like bees behind his tight lips. Then this stopped, and he sat in silence, his face a mask. Blood ran from his calf, and Regan nodded.

"That'll hold you. Thanks for the beans. You'll be walking in a week."

He turned and pushed past the blanket. The children were huddled about their mother, silent at the shot. The burro stood stupidly gazing at him. He raised the pistol again, and shot it in the small, silver-white patch on its forehead. Without a sound, it fell and lay still. He threw the empty gun into the gully.

CHAPTER THREE

For the Want of a Horse

THE young woman began to tremble, and suddenly burst into helpless tears, sank to the ground, her children still clinging to her, frozen with terror.

He strode past them and found the horse in a tumbledown shed. He led him out, mounted and rode to the bridge.

The old woman was standing in the door, her eyes fixed on him, sad and humble.

The horse balked at the bridge. He flogged it furiously with the barrel of the rifle. It danced and reared but would not go forward.

He dismounted and, holding it by the bit, yanked it forward, beating its belly with the rifle-barrel. He got it nearly across when the bridge gave way under the shivering beast. With a yell, Regan leaped for the farther side, and knelt on the edge of the wash while the horse and bridge crashed crackling and screaming into the gully.

He stood up, pale and shaken, and looked over the edge. The horse was upside down in the gully, its head and neck twisted backward, dead under the wreckage of the bridge.

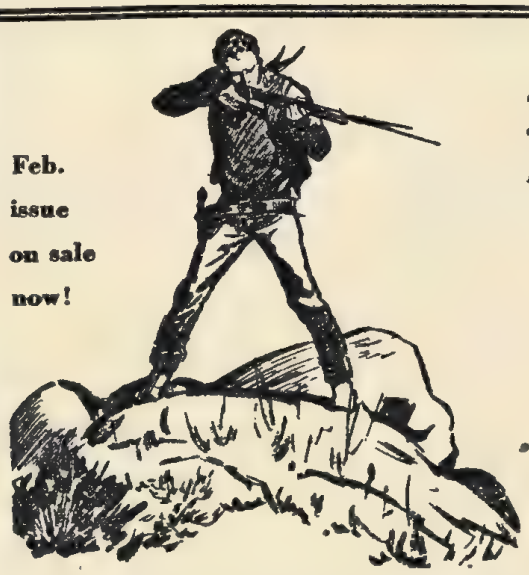
He looked back across the gully at the dead burro. The old woman looked back at him, and after a moment, she made the sign of the cross slowly over her breast.

He turned, his face twisting with rage, and stared over the plain to the north. It was empty of life, dead and gray under the clouds. He turned and looked south, along the side of the arroyo. His head bowed, he stood undecided a moment. Already the ends of his fingers were turning pale with the cold. Slowly he lifted his head, face hard and set, and shouldered the sack. Stubbornly, his head down, he began to walk, lifting his feet carefully from the shallow snow.

Two hundred yards south, where the arroyo suddenly swung east, completing a half circle around the little house, he stepped through the snow into a gopher hole and fell. He sat up, grimacing with pain and holding his ankle with both hands, his face pale and his teeth set. After a while he tried moving his foot, and pain writhed his face again.

Cursing, he ripped the sack into strips, painfully took off his boot and bound the ankle tightly. He got to his knees and stood up on his good leg. Gingerly he tried the other, put his weight on it, and collapsed in agony. He sat there again, the sweat pouring down his face, staring at the ground, and when his teeth began to chatter, he tried crawling, first southward, and then back toward the house. He gave up and sat still, cursing steadily.

After a while he began to crawl around, tearing up sage and dragging it into a heap.



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE 15c

He started a fire and huddled over it, hugging the serape close and feeding the fire meagerly from his pile of sage. He pulled open the bottle of *pulque,* took a drink and slowly relaxed. No sound came down the arroyo from the house. The plain lay frozen, the slow, dead-cold air moving silently over the humped backs of the sage bushes. He hugged the rifle close to him and stared into the fire.

The sun, a dim blur of light behind the leaden clouds overhead, had passed its noon peak and was far down in the afternoon when he woke, shaking with cold as though he were in a fit.

The sound of a song came over the air, a faint voice rising and falling to the south. He sat still, shaking the sleep out of his head, and rebuilding the fire with trembling hands.

As the singing came nearer, he crouched below the level of the sage, took off the sombrero, and peered through the twigs. He saw the singer, riding slowly toward him on an old gray nag. His head was down, the collar of his mackinaw was turned high, and his face, under the brim of a broad black hat, was invisible.

SLOWLY and carefully, Regan raised the rifle and aimed it on the man's chest, waiting as the old nag slowly ambled closer. The singing was still a low, almost tuneless croon.

At thirty yards, Regan pulled the trigger. The snap of steel striking steel sounded loud in the hard, cold air. The singing stopped abruptly, and as he ducked behind the sage he saw the rider jerk his head up and look around.

Lying close under the sage, Regan furiously opened the gun. The chamber was empty. He looked back in the direction of the hut and cursed viciously. Then, quieting himself, he sat up and assumed a huddled pose over the fire.

He ignored the rider, who came on once more, this time no longer singing. When the sound of snapping brush was twenty yards off, he looked up with assumed surprise, and threw up his arm, waving and beckoning him on.

The rider came up, his face hard and bleak. He sat still, looking down at Regan, his eyes narrow and cold. Two sacks, tied together at the necks, hung one on each side of the horse's withers. Regan's eyes went to the butt of a rifle, sticking from a saddle boot.

"By God," Regan said, "I'm glad to see you. I'm stuck. My horse was killed and I twisted my foot." He tried to laugh. "I thought I was going to stay here and freeze. Gimme a ride out of here, will you?"

Very slowly, the suspicion died in the hard black eyes of the rider, and his mouth, under the grizzle of black beard, turned up slightly at the corners.

"By Gor, it's a good thing I come along, ain't it, brother? A night out here and you'd a been a goner for sure. Where'n hell did you pop up from? I'd a seen your tracks if you'd of been south of here, and you'd a seen Mama Ortega's, if you'd a been north." He burst into a laugh. "Hell, think of you freezing here three hundred yards from a house. Hell!"

Regan eyed him sharply. "Where you going?"

The rider sat back. "Going up to the county seat. Going up to get my dough. Going up to see a girl. A black-haired gal by the name of Maria." His grin was broad. "I been two months on this hell-blasted plain and I'm a-sick of snow and myself. Hop on the back, brother. I'll get you to Mama Ortega's and we'll have a snort of *pulque* and I'll borrow the burro for you."

Regan smiled brightly and his eyes were like black holes in a board, expressionless and hollow, fixed on the butt of the rifle.

"Give me a hand up, pal. I can't even stand on this foot of mine."

The rider dismounted and came toward him. He stopped short, seeing the bottle.

"What you got there, brother? Well bless my black heart, it looks like a *pulque* from here. Why wait for Mama Ortega's?" He sat down, cross-legged, by the fire, grinning across it at Regan.

The smile on Regan's mouth trembled once and then stiffened. "Sure, pal." He uncorked the bottle and watched the other take a long drink. He took the bottle back and helped himself. "Now give me a hand upon the horse, will you?"

"What's your hurry, brother? Hell, we should have a celebration. You know what would have happened to you if I hadn't come along? Either you'd of froze tonight or the bloody wolves would of got you, that's what."

"Wolves?" Regan asked, trying to keep the impatience out of his face.

"Wolves. By God, that *pulque* sure works fast, don't it? I ain't had a drink in two months. Wolves thick as fleas." He sat looking at Regan, a puzzled look in his eyes. "Ain't I seen you somewhere, brother? Seems like I have, somewheres."

Regan saw his eyes following his tracks north. "Well, by God, you must have seen Mama Ortega's brother, if you come from the north. How come you didn't crawl back? Listen, we'll see them, and then we'll go on and see Maria. You'll like Mama Ortega, brother. She's a fine old woman."

Regan looked at him fixedly. "I'll tell you why, pal. I'll tell you the truth. I was heading for Mexico. For a reason. I didn't stop because I didn't want to see anybody. That's why I didn't crawl back."

CHAPTER FOUR

Trail to the River

THE other scratched his beard. "For a reason," he said. "So that's it. It must be some reason. I know a few fellers would be glad to have a bed in jail this winter."

Regan leaned forward, his eyes intent on the other's. "Listen, pal. I'll put it clean to you. I need your help. If ever a man needed help, I do. I've got to get to Mexico. I'll give you fifty dollars for your horse. You can get one from off these Ortegas."

The other looked at him shrewdly for a minute. Then he slowly shook his head. "I need the nag. It's a special nag. Besides, I ain't got time. I got money waiting for me at the county seat. Big money."

Regan leaned forward. The edge of his serape dragged into the coals of the fire but he didn't notice it. "Listen. It's only thirty miles to the river. For God's sake, sell me the horse."

The other shook his head slowly. "Brother, you'd have to sleep out one night. It'd take two men, keeping the fire up by shifts. There's wolves on this plain, and the rabies is bad this winter. Half of them is plumb crazy. One of 'em walked smack in the front door of a sheepherder's cabin and run off with his little girl. They'd pull you and the horse down together, when they're loco like now."

"All right," Regan said. "Then come with me. I'll pay you. You take me down to the river. I'll pay you good."

"How much?"

"A hundred dollars."

The other looked at the ground moodily.

"It'll only take you three days," Regan said urgently. "A hundred dollars for three days."

The other looked up. "Let's see the money." Regan pulled the money from his pocket.

"All right, I'll take you. I'll get a horse

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from Mama Ortega. Then we can start."

"No," Regan said. "I don't want them to know I've been by. Nobody."

"I'll be damned if I walk thirty miles for a hundred dollars, brother. With your foot, you gotta ride. We only got one horse."

"All right," Regan said, pulling the rest of the money from his other pocket. "Two hundred dollars. We can ride double."

The other sighed, then shrugged. "All right. I'll do it. Let's have the money now."

Regan started to pull it back, and stopped himself. "I'll pay you when we get there."

"Now, brother, now."

Dull rage burned in the back of Regan's eyes but he handed it over. The other stood up, stuffing it into his pants. He gave Regan a hand up, and helped him on the horse.

"By Gor, I damn near forgot the *pulque,*" the man said, and went back to the fire. He returned with the bottle, waved it toward the cabin, and took a drink. Regan eyed him quietly.

"If a man stayed awake all night and kept up a big fire, would he be safe from these wolves?"

The other smiled shrewdly. "If he could build it big enough. Rabid wolves is straight from hell. Even the Injuns is scared white."

Regan grinned. "Let's go."

The other took the reins and led the horse off, humming to himself as he walked. Regan smiled to himself and loosened the rifle in the scabbard.

"How much you got on your head, brother?" the leader sang back suddenly. "Five hundred bucks?"

Regan tightened all over, and the walker turned around, grinning. "That's all right, brother, I wouldn't turn you in for blood money. I ain't that kind. I was just curious, that's all. You're good and safe with me, and I'll get you through in good shape. You can trust this old hunter."

Regan swallowed. "You mean you'd help me get away for two hundred, even if you could make a thousand by turning me in?"

"Hell, yes, brother. I don't believe in trading in humans. Me, I'm a wolf-hunter. I trade in wolves. Cow outfit pays me sixty a month and I get the bounties clean." He was walking jauntily, swinging the bottle in his hand and taking a sip every once in a while. "Why, I got a fine big head in one of them sacks now that's worth a hundred dollars cash, up to the county seat. Stock association pays good money for them big grays. No sir, I'm a wolf hunter, not a damn dirty rat. I wouldn't turn you in, brother. Not this hunter. Don't worry. You can count on me."

He turned around, grinning.

The grin died as he saw the end of the rifle barrel pointed at him.

"I'M NOT worrying," Regan said, grinning now in turn. "You think I don't know what you're planning? Get me out of the way of Ortega's and shoot me for that reward—that was your idea. Kill me and take me along with the wolf heads to the county seat."

The hunter shook his head slowly, his mouth open. "Brother, I wouldn't do a thing like—"

"Come over here and give me back that two hundred."

"So that's it," the trapper said. His head stopped shaking and he looked at Regan almost composedly. "Your lousy two hundred dollars. You can walk for it if you want it, brother. If you can't walk on that bum leg, you can crawl."

"Come over here," Regan repeated, jerking the muzzle of the rifle. "You come over here and give me the two hundred. I'll let you go. I'll just take your horse and go on south. Come on."

The trapper's eyes narrowed and he swung the bottle in his hand. "The *pulque,*" he said. "So that's where you got it. Mama Ortega's. What'd you do? Murder them all for a bottle of *pulque?* Is that why you didn't want to go back there?"

Regan's mouth tightened. He kicked the horse toward the hunter, who turned and trotted away, circling.

"Stop!" Regan shouted in a rage. "Stop, or by God, I'll lay you down where you stand."

The hunter turned and faced him, eyeing him carefully. "There wouldn't be anything to keep you from killing me once you had your money, would there? By God, I remember. You're Wolf Regan. You killed your buddy for a thousand dollars." He grinned suddenly. "Wolf Regan."

"I'll give you one chance to come over here and give me that money," Regan said.

"You get down and walk for it," the hunter said. "Get off that horse, Wolf Re-

gan, and walk for it. I've heard about you. The meanest, lousiest skunk west of the Pecos. By God, you can kill me, but you can't order me."

Regan's hand tightened. The muzzle of the rifle spat, and the hunter whirled, stumbling. He got to his feet again, holding his left arm with his hand. His face was dull with shock.

"Come over here," Regan said. "You can still walk. After the next one, you won't be able to."

The hunter let go of his arm and with a quick movement reached under his mackinaw and came out with a handful of long knife.

"You come and get it, you lousy coyote," he said, his grin this time twisted.

The rifle bucked again, and the hunter fell. He lay on the ground, groaning a little, and blood began to sop his pants-leg. He turned his head and looked at Regan with pain-dulled eyes.

Regan rode the horse over to him and sat looking down, hate and rage twisting his face. "You dirty louse," he said. "I told you to give it to me."

"Come on down and get it," the hunter gasped.

Regan looked south over the dark gray plain. The sun, a dim lamp behind the web of clouds, was far down to the west. In the east, the clouds were breaking up and he could see the hard, cold blue of winter sky. A faint breeze whispered through the snow-shrouded sage-brush.

He looked down at the hunter. "There's not a damned thing you can do with that knife," he said. "I'll get my money back, all right."

Slowly and carefully, he swung his bad leg over the horn, and holding the reins and pommel tightly in one hand, lowered himself gingerly to the ground. With the reins in one hand and the rifle in the other, he crawled the few feet to the man on the ground. The horse stood quietly, almost dozing.

He leveled the rifle at the hunter's head. "You think I won't get back on?" he asked, smiling. "You think so? You think you'll stab me with your lousy knife?" He laughed.

The hunter looked back at him. "I wouldn't try to kill you," he said. "Killing's too good. I'm going to make you beg for mercy, Wolf. And you ain't going to get any. Not where you're going now."

REGAN grinned. "I don't need any. With your horse and the food you got in those sacks, I'll do all right. And if I do need any help, you helped me, didn't you? People always help me. There's something about my face."

He put the reins under his knee and steadied the rifle with both hands, aiming on the other's head at a distance of four feet.

The hunter made a sudden lunge, hurling the knife. Regan ducked instinctively, but the knife hurtled far to his left, and over his head.

The horse screamed, the reins yanked from under Regan's knee and hoofs beat thunderously on the frozen ground. He turned and saw the horse tearing through the sage, dragging its reins, the knife sagging from its rump and blood gushing down its leg.

The reins hung on a bush and whirled the horse, breaking under the strain. The old horse stood quivering violently, its head down. The knife fell out of the wound, and blood came more freely. It stood there, thirty yards away, wild-eyed with terror.

Regan's face was white. He turned and looked at the hunter, and the hunter looked back at him, his eyes laughing. In a burst of fury, Regan raised the rifle.

"Don't, you'll scare the horse off," the hunter said. "Don't you think you'd better crawl after that horse? There're wolves on this plain and it's getting dark."

Regan lowered the rifle and began crawling toward the horse, talking to it in a high, whining voice, consoling and piteous at the same time.

The horse stared at him. He got to his feet and, using the rifle as a crutch, made his way toward him faster, stooped low and hobbling awkwardly. The horse, alarmed at the grotesque figure approaching, snorted, and wheeled away, trotted a few yards and stopped again.

The hunter laughed and rage flooded Regan's face again.

He hobbled after the horse once more, wheedling and whining, begging it to stop, calling it soft love names, praising it and making kissing sounds with his mouth.

The horse waited till he was within fifteen

feet, shuddered violently and wheeled off again, stopping even farther way. The sound of the hunter's laughter came again, and Regan stood with head bowed, weeping with rage.

He tried once more, and when the horse wheeled again, stood upright, cursing it at the top of his voice, his words carried over the frozen waste, high and wild, by the faint wind.

He started after it again, and this time the horse wheeled immediately, trotting lamely away, and Regan, cursing with fury, raised the rifle and fired shot after shot into it. The horse sagged and fell, and Regan stood with smoking rifle in his hands, firing in wild fury until the hammer snapped on the empty chamber.

He stood still, his whole body shaking violently, and then he began to cry, wildly, spasmodically, his sobs wailing on the wind across the empty waste.

The sun was gone, and the sky overhead was clear now of clouds. Bright stars, twinkling with malice, began to prick the darkening waste above, and there was a sound to the south that stopped his sobbing, stopped his quaking and shaking. He stood frozen, listening. It was like a dog, but more sweet, more practiced, a dog crying after the death of its master.

He turned and began hobbling back, trying to track the horse in the dim light now coming only from the stars. He could not follow it, and he could not find the knife, and at last he stood before the hunter again.

The man on the ground was quiet, barely breathing. The blood from his leg was now a great puddle of frozen red on the snow and his face was stiff.

The two hundred dollars were in one of his blue hands. He looked at Regan and smiled. "I'm lucky," he whispered. "I'm lucky. I'll be dead in ten minutes. I'm lucky."

Regan fell on his knees and stared at him.

The faint howl came again from the south. "The big gray ones. They're hungry, Regan. Your own brothers. They've smelled us. That wind has gone a long way."

Regan stared at him, his face frozen.

"You take the money," the hunter said, twitching the bills in his hand. "You give the money to the wolves. They'll help you for two hundred dollars. They'll get you safe to Mexico." His eyes were smiling faintly. "Just ask them. They'll look at your face, and they'll help you. Just wait. Twenty minutes. They'll be here, and you can ask them."

Regan crouched still, listening to the smooth, even song, rolling and rising, swelling slightly, now many voices.

"You ever seen them?" the hunter whispered, his voice barely louder than the wind over the sage. "They jump up and catch by the throat and pull it down. They race and leap and take by the throat and rip. They love the blood. They eat while it is still living. I seen cattle pulled down. The wolves eat while the guts are still squirming. They eat the heart while it is beating. They'll be here in a minute. You ask them for help when they come. And thanks for shooting me so good."

HE SHUT his eyes. The wind ruffled the bills in his hand, and then slowly they slipped out of his fingers. The wind caught them, lifted one or two and flipped them away across the snow.

Regan suddenly took the corpse by the shoulder and shook it violently. "Wake up!" he yelled. The corpse made no move.

He lifted his head and listened again and, his eyes wide with terror, he turned and using the rifle as a crutch, began hobbling frantically back toward the Ortega hut.

It was a long way. The rifle barrel went through the snow into gopher holes and he fell time and again, pulling himself up weeping with fear and pain, struggling frantically on while the noise of the wolves grew behind him.

He reached the ravine and hobbled blindly along the side of it, sweat streaming from his face, gasping for breath, crying and moaning. His hat fell off and the serape dragged twisted on his shoulders.

The baying suddenly broke up and quieted, and he looked back. Faint sounds came across the snow from where the horse had fallen, and he could hear in the frozen quiet, snarls and throaty yapping and the tearing of flesh. Dim shapes, hardly different from the star-shadows of the bushes, swarmed around the place where the carcass lay, and then several separated, streaking through the brush toward the body of the hunter, and the snarling and yapping broke out anew.

He turned again, running frantically. He

threw away the rifle and ran free, falling as his leg gave way, struggling up and running again, indifferent to pain, his eyes starting from his head.

Lights gleamed ahead now, the square, yellow eyes of the dobe hut, and with relief and hope shining in his face, he raced floundring along the arroyo toward them, crying out as their brightness grew larger.

As he raced toward the bridge the howling started again, and grew louder. He came to the bridge, and as the sight of it at the bottom of the arroyo struck him, a cry of agony and terror tore out of his mouth.

"Peregrino!" he screamed, his voice hoarsely tearing his throat. "Peregrino!"

The baying was closer, and far down the arroyo he could see the dark shapes, seeming flat on the ground, slipping toward him like fingers of running blood over the snow.

"Peregrino!" he screamed again.

The blanket on the door flung aside. He saw the old man, sitting on the floor inside.

"Peregrino! The wolves!"

"Ai, ai, I hear them."

"Peregrino!" he screamed. "Come, bring a gun, a gun!"

"Ai, ai," the old man wailed. "You have my gun, señor."

"Peregrino, Peregrino!" he screamed. "My God, bring a knife, bring a sickle, anything!"

"Ai, ai, señor," the old man cried, terror and sadness in his voice. "I cannot walk. I cannot come. I pray to God to help you, but I cannot come."

Regan fell on his knees.

They were coming up the arroyo. Three raced up the narrow gulch and fell on the corpse of the horse under the wrecked bridge. They were coming along the edge, and over the plain, their voices high.

He knelt at the edge, screaming. "My God, my God, help me, take all the money!"

They balked suddenly, flooding up to him, and seeing him, a living creature, kneeling there, they paused. They stood in a circle, pouring in around him, their tongues out, their eyes green in the light from the hut. In the house, the old woman screamed, and the door slammed. He could hear the old man wailing, pity and terror in his voice, "Ai, ai, ai."

He turned and faced them. They stood panting, their eyes shining and seeming to laugh, the blood of the horse and the hunter still on their grinning muzzles.

"Wait!" he screeched, babbling insanely. "I give you everything, everything, take the money, I give up, I will go to jail, oh my God, I will hang, anything!"

They moved forward, their breath steaming upward in the dead-cold air.

They began to close in.

"Have mercy," he screamed at them, his voice rising to a hideous howl. "Mercy, my God, mercy!"

They did not understand. They closed in, flinging in upon him like furry arrows of hell, drowning him in a sea of tossing, struggling dark bodies, and his screams rose toward the cold stars.

After a while, the screaming died, and there was no sound but the snarling and the ripping of flesh, and in the house there was crying.

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But the reward was eventually offered, and Murietta was killed near the Tejon Pass in California. Captain Love and his rangers received the reward. "Three Fingered Jack," one of the band, had also been captured. It was his hand and Murietta's head that were pickled in alcohol and later sold at a sheriff's sale for $36.

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(Continued from page 57)

his head toward the front of the Congress. Flames had appeared above the roof of the Oriental and were rapidly spreading toward the hotel across the shanties lying between. The ruddy glow lighted the group with Crane under the hotel awning, now augmented by a dozen frightened girls in various stages of costume and make-up. Abel Crane was swearing with a high-pitched, fluent frenzy.

Ruth Conant laughed. "I understand that, all right," she laughed. "Sounds good, doesn't it? First sense I've ever heard out of the man."

"Want to listen to a little from me?" Bennett asked softly. Ruth nodded. "You're right, girl," Bennett went on. "The fire will drive Crane out to the boys. And he won't dare use his men or his guns. He'll have to take what's coming to him or burn. So it's wound up. If he comes out from under that awning fast enough, the boys'll save his hotel for him. But it'll be run the way it ought to be from now on, along with his store and his pits. So I've learned something, too. One of the boys was shouting it a couple of minutes ago. I was a fool to have quit something like you. So big a fool I didn't see I had a skirt with something more to it than lace, something more to it than claws. I want my old job back, Ruth."

The girl glanced at the flames towering over the Oriental. "In the casino partnership?" she said.

Bennett shook his head. "I've been on the skids long enough. I'm going back to work. I'll make money. And I've got to have a woman to spend it on."

The girl tipped her head back and her arms crept up over his shoulders. "I don't know about Columbia," she said softly, "But I'm afraid the lady from New Orleans has a new boss."

When Bennett lifted his head again, a man whistled. Unabashedly, in a marveling tone touched with a strong Scandinavian accent, he said, "I bet that Bennett been a Swede!"

"He was an O'Toole, or a Ryan, or maybe even a Delaney on his mother's side," Mike Delaney protested loudly.

"Like plenty hell!" Papa Lee said with a wide grin. "Him Chinese. . . ."

THE END

UP THE TRAIL

(Ed's note: The following concerns Mr. Cunningham's novel, "Killer," starting on page 114.)

ABOUT the wolves killing a man while he is still up and around, I guess I was following what might be called the European tradition, though I didn't know that was what it was at the time. After your questions, I went up to the library and read up about wolves.

When I wrote the story, I figured what I would do if I were a wolf and real hungry. It seemed to me that I had heard countless stories about wolves following troikas and people throwing each other out the back. Also I have a friend named Johnny Weills who was bitten by a wolf. Weills had shot this wolf in Oregon with a pistol, and thought it was dead; but when he went up to look at it, the wolf jumped up and took a snap at his stomach. Of course, the wolf was wounded and naturally rather cross about it. In the story, I got Regan crippled, trapped and without arms, and I figured this was enough to warrant the wolves' attacking him.

However, on reading up about it, I find that since the advent of firearms, wolves are very wary of men. This applies to the American gray wolf. The European wolf, although the same species, seems to act differently. A French wolf in the last century devoured 60 people and maimed 35 more before being killed. The wolf in European environment is definitely dangerous to people, and hence the European fiction is true enough.

But the American wolf, as I said, is very timid, with men, because of the rifle.

However, there are apparently two occasions for attacking people, one, when they are cross, and two, when they are rabid. A little girl once threw a stone at a wolf, who was minding his own business, and got severely chewed up for it. Also my friend Weills.

When wolves are rabid, they will do anything. And rabies is apparently quite common among wolves. Where they are in any numbers, they have epidemics of it, and go completely nuts. One rancher lost

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five stallions and several hundred head of cattle who were bitten and went rabid themselves. They will attack people then, even entering houses and towns. The Indians used to be very much afraid of mad wolves, because they would do anything.

In the far north also, wolves will attack men for food—that is, where they are not much hunted. This accounts for Jack London's treatment of wolves, I guess.

With all this in mind, I thought I had better protect your editor, since he bought the story, from somebody who might write in with a squawk. Personally, for all that the books say, I would not go out without a gun and wait around in the snow to see if some wolf would eat me or not. Maybe I am too conditioned by the European tradition. But I can just imagine somebody writing in about wolves never attacking human beings, and your editor being embarrassed about it.

So I am enclosing some substitute pages.

The only change is to make these wolves rabid. Nobody can argue with that, technically. The disease is evidently quite common. Being "loco" makes the wolves more fearsome, I think, and it gives a definite reason for the attack, since it is very true that wolves will attack anything, and in fact, look around for something to kill, when they are diseased in this manner. In fact, Ernest T. Seton, in his series on animal life, reports packs of wolves, rabid ones, traveling about covered with gashes where they have bitten themselves after failing to find anything else to bite.

The traditional fear of wolves might make the story stand as it is. Also, nobody has proven that a normal wolf *won't* kill a human being. And as I said, I personally would not put myself to the proof, or be any wolf's pudding. But making these wolves specifically rabid takes away all element of doubt. I hope these pages will make everything check out all right.

—*John M. Cunningham*

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